

interzone

# interzone

ISSUE #232 • JAN-FEB 2011 • ONLY £3.95

'THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE' SF REVU

NOAM CHOMSKY & THE TIME BOX

**DOUGLAS LAIN**

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

**MICHAEL R. FLETCHER**

ILLUSTRATED BY MARK PEXTON

HEALTHY, WEALTHY, AND WISE

**SUE BURKE**

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

BY PLUCKING HER PETALS

**SARAH L. EDWARDS**

ILLUSTRATED BY MARK PEXTON

NICK LOWE'S MUTANT POPCORN  
DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK  
TONY LEE'S LASER FODDER  
BOOK REVIEWS

READERS' POLL

JAMES WHITE AWARD WINNER

PRINTED IN THE UK





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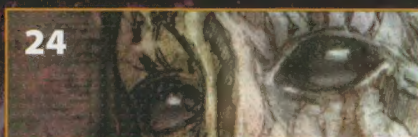
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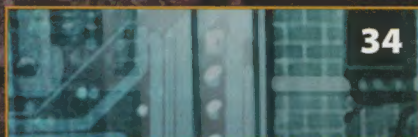
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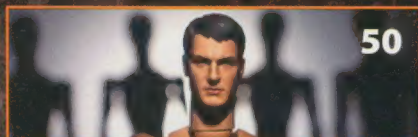
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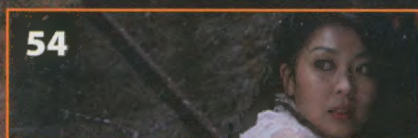
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INFECTED ZONE





# ANSIBLE LINK DAVID LANGFORD



**As Others See Us.** Sarah Baskerville, the UK civil servant in trouble for uninhibited political comments on Twitter, became the subject of a typical *Daily Mail* witch-hunt – surprisingly picked up by *The Independent*, whose political hack drove the knife home by calling her ‘The self-confessed *Doctor Who* fan...’

**Jo Fletcher** moved from Gollancz to Quercus in January to launch her very own sf/fantasy/horror imprint, catchily named Jo Fletcher Books.

**Awards.** *Galaxy National Book Awards* for ‘unrivalled contribution to the [UK] publishing industry’, i.e. selling shedloads of books: Martin Amis, Terry Pratchett. • *Hans Christian Andersen* children’s literature prize: J.K. Rowling. This is a new award, not the established Andersen

▲ Archive photo: James and Judy Blish perform a Cordwainer Smith skit at the 1973 Novacon, as the Lord High Abstract Mentality and his catwoman C'meer (‘C'meer! C'meer!’).

medal which last went to David Almond. • *World Fantasy Award* for best novel: China Miéville, *The City & The City*.

**Iain M. Banks** committed an epigram at the Cheltenham Literature Festival: ‘You don’t write space opera in a vacuum!’ Later, at Novacon: ‘I could write hard SF, but I wouldn’t be writing on all cylinders. I’d have to shut off my stupidity cylinders.’ He promises a new middle initial if he ever moves into hard porn: ‘Iain X. Banks.’

**Greg & Astrid Bear** challenged Project

Gutenberg on copyright, arguing that US case law contradicts Gutenberg’s assumption that so many stories published in pulp sf magazines (particularly by Astrid’s father the late Poul Anderson) are public domain: ‘Project Gutenberg is doing a tremendous service by making available texts that have truly long since fallen out of copyright, but they are clearly overstepping their original mandate. They are not merely exploiting orphan works, but practicing a wholesale kidnapping of works that are under copyright protection. Authors and estates need to aggressively take back what belongs to them.’ (*Ereads.com*)

**A.A. Gill** ran true to form when assessing the achievement of H.G. Wells: ‘Virtually single-handed, he invented that vast alien planet of nerdy literature read exclusively by unwashed young men with a full spectrum of social incapacity.’ (*Sunday Times*)

**Joss Whedon** admitted to ‘strong, mixed emotions’ on hearing that Warner Bros plans a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* film ‘reboot’ without involving him: ‘I always hoped that Buffy would live on even after my death. But, you know, AFTER.’ (*E!online*)

**As Others See Us II.** Sam Parker (who?) of Celebrity Channel/Eleven (what?) has unprejudiced views: ‘Eleven have never attended a sci-fi convention (honest), but if we ever did, we’d imagine it to be a rather tame affair. / You know – lots of geeks dressed as Wookies and Dr. Who, mingling around quietly with one hand on their inhaler and the other in their Mum or Dad’s palm.’

**The Weakest Link.** Anne Robinson: ‘In libraries, which hyphenated term includes all books, except novels or works inspired by the imagination?’ Contestant: ‘Science fiction.’ AR: ‘In which 1968 science fiction film did Charlton Heston utter the line, “Take your stinking paws off me?”’ Another contestant: ‘2001: A Space Odyssey.’

**Sir Terry Pratchett’s** coat of arms appeared in the *College of Arms Newsletter*. ‘The Arms are blazoned: Sable an ankh between four Roundels in saltire each issuing Argent. / The Crest is Upon a Helm with a Wreath Argent and Sable On Water Barry wavy Sable Argent and Sable an Owl [presumably a morpork] affronty wings



displayed and inverted Or supporting thereby two closed Books erect Gules.' His armorial motto, familiar to Discworld readers in a somewhat dogger Latin version, is NOLI TIMERE MESSOREM.

**The Brown Lands.** More uproar from NZ *Hobbit* filming after a small woman of Pakistani ancestry was rejected as a bit-part player: 'We are looking for light-skinned people. I'm not trying to be... whatever. It's just the brief. You've got to look like a hobbit.' Canonically, some hobbits are browner than others, but this casting agent – since fired – had his own ideas. (*Independent*)

**Clinching Argument.** Jonathan Myerson, best known for denouncing adult Harry Potter readers, discussed his position with children's novelist and Hollywood screenwriter Charlie Fletcher. JM: 'There's a truth which fiction can portray which non-fiction can't reach. It's a different form of truth.' CF: 'That doesn't argue against Harry Potter. That, in fact, reinforces the reason why people should read Harry Potter.' JM: 'No it doesn't, because there aren't wizards!' (BBC Radio 5Live) Out goes *The Tempest* with the bathwater...

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Untimely Dept.* 'By Set, the enemy knew not the hour when he might awake at midnight to feel the taloned fingers...' (Robert E. Howard, 'The Phoenix on the Sword', *Weird Tales*, 1932) • *Dept of Yes, But What Shape Was It?* '...near the bottom of the floor was a rectangular-sized hole...' (Chris Mooney, *The Missing*, 2007) • *Eyeballs in the Sky.* 'You think you can pull the wool over everyone's eyes...but mine, you'll find, are in the back of my head.' (Martin Russell, *Mr T aka The Man Without a Name*, 1977) • *Dept of Workshop Romance.* 'Her climax was a nail he was hammering repeatedly.' (Emma Holly, *Angel at Dawn*, 2011) • *Back-Story Dept.* Chronicler to action hero, on the latter's previous adventures: 'People believe I wrote them cynically for one reason or another – but we know that I did not, that you are real, that your exploits actually happened. One day they will realize this, when governments are prepared to release the information that confirms what you have told me. They will realize that you are no liar and that I am no crackpot – or worse, a commercial writer trying to write a science fiction novel.' (Edward P. Bradbury [Michael Moorcock], *Barbarians of Mars*, 1965)

## R.I.P.

**Bernard Davies** (1923–2010), noted UK Sherlockologist and founding president in 1973 of the Dracula Society, died on 21 September aged 86.



▲ **Bob Guccione** (1930–2010), US publisher best known for *Penthouse*, and of sf relevance for launching its glossy sister magazine *Omni* (1978–1995; web only to 1998), died on 20 October aged 79.

**Mervyn Haisman** (1928–2010), UK TV/film scriptwriter who with Henry Lincoln wrote the 1960s *Doctor Who* storylines 'The Abominable Snowmen', 'The Web of Fear' (introducing the popular Brigadier character) and 'The Dominators', died on 29 October.

**Eva Ibbotson** (1925–2010), US author of *The Great Ghost Rescue* (1975), *Which Witch?* (1979) and other children's fantasies, died on 20 October. [PAUL DI FILIPPO] She was a 2001 Smarties gold award winner.



▲ **Harry Mulisch** (1927–2010), eminent mainstream Dutch author who explored sf/fantasy themes in *De toekomst van gisteren* (*Yesterday's Future*, 1972), *De ontdekking van de hemel* (*The Discovery of Heaven*, 1992, filmed 2001) and *De Procedure* (1998), died on 30 October aged 83.

**Maurice Murphy** (1935–2010), principal trumpeter of the London Symphony Orchestra 1977–2007, whose playing can be heard in all six *Star Wars* films, died on 28 October.

**Rebecca Neason** (1954–2010), US author of the *ST:TNG* tie-in *Guises of the Mind* (1993), two *Highlander* spinoffs and three original fantasy novels, died on 31 August; she was 55.

**Ruth Park** (1917–2010), New Zealand-born Australian novelist best known for mainstream work, whose children's books include the fine time-travel fantasy *Playing Beatie Bow* (1980), died on 16 December aged 93.



▲ **Johnny Sheffield** (1931–2010), US actor whose best-known part was Boy in Johnny Weissmuller's 1930s and 1940s Tarzan films, died on 15 October after falling off a ladder while pruning a palm tree; he was 79.

**Takeshi Shudo** (1949–2010), Japanese anime scriptwriter and novelist who worked on some of the best-known modern anime and won the first Anime Grand Prix screenwriting award in 1983, died on 28 October.

**John Steakley** (1951–2010), US sf/horror author of *Armor* (1984) and *Vampires* (1990, filmed by John Carpenter as *Vampires*), died on 27 November aged 59.

**Brian Williams** (?1956–2010), UK illustrator of many *Lone Wolf* and other gamebooks by Joe Dever, and of spinoff novels by John Grant, died unexpectedly on 4 October; he was 54.

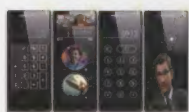






Douglas Lain is the author of dozens of short stories and two novels. His work has regularly appeared in literary magazines and journals since 1999, and his first book, *Last Week's Apocalypse*, was a collection of these stories published by Night Shade Books. His first novel, *Billy Moon: 1968*, tells the story of Christopher Robin Milne's fictional involvement with the French general strike in May of 1968, and is due out from Tor Books this year. His second novel, *The Brainwash Brand*, is currently under option at Tor.

# NOAM CHOMSKY and the TIME BOX DOUGLAS LAIN



**CRAWDADDY ONLINE**  
**Jeff Morris**

December 22nd, 2013 – 3:30 pm | 6,815 views | 2 recommendations | 75 comments

## Stuck in History: My Time Box 3.0 Frustration

It's still amazing what can fit in your pocket these days, but while standard computing and gaming devices like iPhones and Mini-Wii systems continue to dominate the market, the most expensive and advanced personal computing device, the Time Box, has had a rough couple of months. Both the recent problems with the marketing and introduction of Box 3.0 which met with less than the projected demand, and the chorus of consumer complaints – the Time Box version of history is too self-contained and static (one example would be the thousands of complaints to the company that visits and revisits to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland always conclude with the Titanic sinking) – has led to a downturn in the company's stock. While educators, science fiction fans, and historical hook-up artists are still purchasing the Box, the company must do something to increase sales beyond these niches, and the company is pinning its future to the hope that version 3.0 will reinvigorate sales. The new Box includes many features consumers have come to expect with hand held computational devices. Partnering with Sprint and Dell, the new Box will allow customers to make cellular calls from the past, to maintain an internet connection as long as one is within the last thousand years of history, and to photograph and take video of both past events and encounters with what everyone agrees is an ever expanding present.

– The WSJ, December 20th, 2013

If anyone needed more proof that the gadget driven marketing scam that was the American Empire is now completely dead, the utter failure to adequately create demand for the world's first personal time machine should suffice as proof. Nintendo, Time Warner, and Apple computers have all backed off their various offers to buy out Time Box incorporated, and while last year it seemed impossible that the product might suffer the same fate as Betamax and electric cars, a year later it's becoming obvious that people without





a history or a future are uninterested in the kind of time travel the Box offers. The public seems content to leave history to the necrophiliacs and Civil War Buffs.

A year ago the device came onto the market like a revelation. The consensus in December of 2012 was that a personal time machine would alter everything. Tech Review at MIT loved Time Box, Doctorow at Boing Boing was beside himself, and historians and political pundits couldn't contain themselves either. The first month out the door people lined up to buy. There was a mad rush, but when consumers found the disclaimer word of mouth put the kibosh to the whole pseudo-event.

It's the first thing you find when you take a Time Box home. The warning is printed on the front page of the instruction manual, plainly and in 36 point Helvetica: TIME BOX IS PARADOX FREE. DO NOT ALTER FACTORY SETTINGS.

If you mess with the Box, adjust the settings, you risk voiding the warranty, and yet it comes equipped with an interface to allow such alterations. I imagine that somebody in marketing thought that this interface might stave off realizations of the obvious. As long as people were under the impression that raising or lowering the probability level and flux could have some impact on their overall experience they could be kept from realizing the obvious.

Time travel is boring as fuck.

It is impossible to impact the past. That's why the Box is underperforming sticky Elmo as a stocking stuffer.

Believe me, I've tried it. A year late to the game I purchased my first Box at the Lloyd Center Mall on black Friday. I just managed not to get trampled on my way from the parking lot to the Computer Store. On my way out I stopped by the food court for a hot dog on a stick, enjoyed the ambience created by the giant fountain and the rats that scurried between the plastic tables as they searched for bits of fries and meat left by the throngs of holiday shoppers, and read and reread the instruction manual:

#### *Steps for Time Box 3.0*

1. *Wearing loose clothing and after consulting your physician, take Time Box in hand and sit comfortably.*
  2. *Input historical figure, architectural style, or any other historical indicator as a search term. (Specific dates along with geographical locations will allow Time Box to transport you with pinpoint accuracy.)*
  3. *Enter timeline and interact with the past.*
  4. *To end Time Box timeline simply reset.*
  5. *Live today as yesterday. Experience yesterday as today.*
- THE TIME BOX IS A PARADOX FREE DEVICE

Once I was home, like every newbie to the Time Box, I set off to change the past. Despite the disclaimers I had to try. The theory is that history is fixed, that you can't kill Hitler, save Jesus, or stop Larry Summers from getting a job with the Clinton Administration, but once I had the thing plugged in and humming I figured maybe everyone else was just going about it in the wrong way. After all, while most physicists agree that the universe is some sort of hologram, that the structure of time is complete, that the universe is one big thing across space and

time, there are dissenters. Some claim that while the universe is a hologram, it's a hologram built out of tinker toys. The structure can be moved around. The universe is one big thing, but it can be rebuilt and altered. It's not cemented together like a model airplane or a brick wall.

One of those dissenters, Professor Hopkins at the University of Hawaii, put it this way:

"You could change the structure if you knew where the seams were, what the elements of construction were. The trouble is finding a way to measure time in qualitative rather than quantitative units. The past appears unified right now, acausal, but the final word hasn't been written yet. We might be able to change history. Theories exist that say we could change it."

I emailed back asking if one might find these seams.

"I don't know. But, let's say you were to find the seams, and that you were able to change the structure, then all the old time travel problems would resurface. If you could change the structure of reality so that your grandfather was never born then how could the universe generate you as a causative agent? It's theoretically possible, if you take the universe to be paraconsistent, and if it turns out that there are qualitative units of construction that can be somehow manipulated on the micro-level," he wrote back.

So there would be paradoxes. That seemed okay. I'd cross those bridges when I came to them, if I came to them.



I connected the Box to my personal computer, plugged it in to the USB port on the back of my computer screen, and typed in my key phrases. I didn't set the device to take me back to something obvious like the attacks of September 11th, 2001, or the day we invaded Iraq for the second

time. Instead I searched for what seemed like a lull, a gap between the two points. I played a hunch.

I found Noam Chomsky at a pizzeria near the campus of MIT in 2002. Caught up with the professor right before the US went down the rabbit hole. Most of my readers probably already know who Noam Chomsky is, but for those who haven't heard of him I'll give the basic bio:

Professor Chomsky is the father of modern linguistics, sort of the Sigmund Freud of universal grammar. However, most people don't know him for his scholarly work. Along with being America's Newton, Chomsky is America's most well known anti-American, or in less reactionary terms, America's most famous dissident. He's a self-described libertarian socialist whose been exposing and urging resistance to the American Imperial project for around fifty years.

The professor was sitting in a faux antique chair by the exit – a flimsy wooden chair that had been painted a light green and then intentionally distressed. The shabby chic furniture offset the chrome tables creating a look of corporate bohemianism. Chomsky was sipping from a Moose Head beer and reading the Financial Times. He was using a red ballpoint pen to circle words and phrases in the paper as I bought a slice of mushroom and olive pizza and took my grease stained paper plate to his table.

When Chomsky looked up at me I realized that I'd entered the Time Box without considering my appearance. I'm nearly



forty and yet I was dressed like a teenager, like a teenager from 2012. I was wearing loose blue jeans that hung down below my waist exposing my tartan boxer shorts, an orange T-shirt that read FREE THE BUNNY SUICIDE in sarcastic Helvetica, and my eyeglasses that, back in 2002, probably looked like something from *Star Trek* or an Andy Warhol factory party. The frames are oversized, made of transparent plastic, and filled with red ink. Cool, no?

And I was unshaven. And I was not wearing deodorant.

I saw a deep and abiding tolerance in Chomsky's eyes, and I couldn't tell whether he'd noted my attire or not. He looked at me and then down at his plate and his body language didn't change. It didn't matter whether I was kempt or unkempt, rational or irrational. He didn't anticipate any surprises.

I did not introduce myself, but sat down across from him at the chrome table, took a bite of my gourmet pizza, and then started in with my mouth full. I asked Professor Chomsky why he was willing to stay at the level of critique. I asked him why he didn't use his influence to move people to gum up the machinery of war. Why did the professor always stop short of offering a prescription?

"That's not a serious question."

"Why not?"

"The way to make this world better is to work with other people on the various problems. It is just a matter of doing the hard work. There isn't a prescription. That's not how the world works. You're looking for utopia."

Chomsky had already heard the question I'd come back in time to ask him. He'd heard it and heard it. At every lecture he'd ever given, at every book screening, at every cocktail party for eminent academics, he was always asked the same inevitable question:

"What are we supposed to do?"

Listening to Chomsky prattle out his standard answer, chewing gourmet pizza and watching Chomsky peel back the label on his Moose Head beer, I realized that the professor didn't really have an answer. In fact, after all the years he'd spent fielding it, he still didn't even understand the question.

Chomsky's theory of generative grammar postulates that the human mind is constructed with language built in. There is a universal grammar built into humanity, there are rules of expression set up biologically. There are limits to what can be expressed and, no matter how hard one tries, one can't go beyond those limits.

Consider two sentences:

Sentence 1: "Unicorns sleep furiously at the moon."

Here you've got a subject, a verb, an adverb, and an object. It's an absurd sentence, but it fits the grammar. To the extent that the sentence is absurd is exactly the degree to which it fits. Just to rise to the level of absurdity the sentence has to work by the rules.

Sentence 2: "Zoom zagga ba bagga za grumboon!"

Here we have a sentence that, on its face, is nothing but a series of expletives. The word "zoom" for instance fills in for a subject, maybe. Perhaps zoom is standing in for the definite article? Try saying the sentence out loud.

"Zoom zagga ba bagga za grumboon!"

I wanted Chomsky to help me find the seam. I thought Chomsky could push, that he had power in reserve that he was reluctant to use. But talking to him in the pizza shop in 2002, listening to his rap on how we had to organize, on how the solutions available were obvious if not exactly sexy, I realized that he was as stuck as anyone. Chomsky had to work within the system, within the grammar, even if in the end he only managed to be absurd.

I tried to tell him. I showed him the Time Box, and told him when I was from, but Chomsky wasn't particularly impressed. It wasn't that he didn't believe me so much as what I told him didn't even enter his consciousness. I produced the Time Box from my jeans pocket and held it up to him, but he didn't really look at it. Instead he continued to explain what organizing was, what alternative media was, what true self-interest was. I nodded along and then walked to the center of the restaurant and pressed the reset button.

I'm sure he was as undisturbed by my disappearance as he'd been by my sudden appearance. I imagine he simply finished his pizza slice, took one last sip of beer, and headed back to MIT.

I tried to return to that moment, to flip back fifteen minutes, to the moment before our conversation had started, but I overshot it. I hadn't set the preference correctly and I ended up standing in the dark, surrounded by chairs set upside down on the tabletops. Across the street from the pizzeria a two story

New Colonial house had been converted into a second hand clothing store, and as I fumbled with the Time Box, struggled to find out when I was and send myself to the right moment, I stepped forward, toward the pizzeria's pane glass front window. I stared out at the display across



the street.

The mannequin in the second hand store's window had peach colored lips. She was wearing a paisley patterned Sari and had several beaded necklaces around her neck. She was lit by the neon logo for Phillips 66 to her left and a Hamms Beer sign to her right.

My Time Box blinked at me in the dark. I glanced at the photographs of Chomsky, of a slice pizza, and then at Saddam Hussein. Each image flickered across the touch-screen.

I went back and asked Chomsky again and again. I tried several approaches:

Chomsky ate a pizza slice with sun dried tomatoes. He took a bite and got some tomato paste on his glasses as I approached his table. When he put down his copy of the Financial Times I opened an umbrella and put it down on the tabletop between us, covering his plate and knocking over his bottle of Moose Head.

And then I brought him a box of chocolate candies.

Then I tried saying everything he would say the moment before he said it, but Chomsky held his ground. He could not be moved.

The new features of the Time Box didn't help me either. I did not think to take a picture with the camera feature, or transcribe the moment to digital video. Why would anyone ever use those features? Why take a picture when you can just go back and see the same damned mistakes over and over again?



## CRAWDADDY ONLINE

Jeff Morris

January 2nd, 2014 – 3:17 pm | 3,225 views | 0 recommendations | 25 comments

## The Time Box: Same As it Ever Was

*"What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you, 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence...' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?"*

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882

Before Christmas I argued that Time Box Incorporated's troubles cannot be addressed at the level of branding or by adding features. The trouble is intrinsic in the device itself. The Box brings the consumer into a frozen past, a history stuck in amber. Since then I've had a chance to experiment further with the device, and I'm compelled to continue in the same vein.

The second time out I typed in Noam Chomsky again but added the name Terence McKenna to the search.

McKenna was a minor celebrity in the 90s. Famous amongst stoners and closet new agers, he was sort of an updated Timothy Leary. He promoted drugged out passivity as a panacea, taught at the Esalen Institute, pushed Human Potential and anti-ideologies, but, unlike Chomsky, he did dare to offer a remedy for our social ills. Even if his career was a symptom of the boomer's retreat from political engagement, there was an element to his spiel that I wanted to keep. McKenna argued that the human imagination could be our escape hatch. I typed his name next to the name Chomsky and pressed return.

On November 16th, 1971, Chicago O'Hare International Airport was less antiseptic than it would be forty-four years later. The plaster walls were off white, the ceiling was lower than it would be, and so, despite the fact that Gate 23 was mostly empty, the space seemed cramped. The metal mesh wall panel behind the check-in desk communicated some of the authority inherent in industrial technology, but was too physical and intrusive to truly impress. The check-in desk itself was just a simple box with the logo for TWA, the interlocking globes and the red lettering, knitted into nubby blue fabric. All in all the scale and design created the sense that the airport was run by human beings. Chicago International came across as vulnerable. It made me smile.

I arrived inside the gate, past the stainless steel rails, past security, already sitting in an orange fiberglass chair facing the plate glass. Behind me and to my left a 44-year-old Chomsky stood with his wife Carole. They were patiently waiting in line to check-in. Terence McKenna was closer to me, leaning against a white pillar on my side of the stainless steel rails. A

young woman sat next to him on a steamer trunk.

Chomsky and his wife were both well dressed. Chomsky wore a grey wool suit and dark blue tie, while his wife wore a dark blue floral skirt and a black turtleneck. McKenna, on the other hand, looked a bit unkempt in blue jeans and a brown and white flannel shirt. His beard was scruffy. His hair was long, but not long enough to be a conscious choice. The woman with him looked cleaner in her jeans. Her long blonde hair was partially obscured by a straw cowboy hat.

The Pentagon Papers had leaked to the New York Times five months earlier, in June of 1971, and Chomsky, who'd helped Ellsberg release the documents to the media, was flying to a speaking engagement about the document at UC Berkeley. McKenna was waiting for the same flight after spending many months in the Amazon. While Chomsky had been composing scathing essays about both LBJ and Richard Nixon, Terence McKenna had been hallucinating in Peru.

"Flight 2012 to Berkeley, California is running behind schedule this afternoon," the brunette stewardess behind the ticket counter told Chomsky. She smiled at the air in front of her face, but when she made eye contact with the professor her smile faltered. "We don't have an ETA at the moment, but I will let you know just as soon as that information is available." She was uncomfortable in her pink and orange polyester uniform, and attempted to straighten it by pulling down on the uniform's short skirt. She stepped back from the counter and adjusted her pillbox hat.



I fiddled with the dials on the Time Box, used the temporal uplink to search for information on McKenna's trip to the Amazon and Chomsky's essays on the Pentagon Papers. This was probably the only moment in all of space/time

wherein these two men could be found in the same room, and I decided that my goal, the way I could change things, would be to get them to argue. I'd arrange it so Chomsky had to listen and fully comprehend the terms and assumptions behind McKenna's hallucinations, and I'd get McKenna to pay attention to Chomsky. But before I did anything I'd see how the moment had originally played out. The first time through I'd just listen and watch.

In the twenty minutes before the boarding of Flight 2012 began Chomsky barely spoke. Carole offered to get him a copy of the Financial Times at the newsstand and Noam stared out at the jet planes on the runway as he waited. He barely moved. McKenna, on the other hand, never stopped talking, even though it was apparent that the young woman he was traveling with had lost interest in what he was saying. McKenna described Nixon's America as a dream that people needed to wake up from, and he wondered if the illusion could really last another four years. "Everything is changing," McKenna said.

When Carole came back and Noam turned away from the Tarmac to read the New York Times and the Financial Times, McKenna seemed to feel a need to take over this staring out at the horizon. He pressed up against the glass, first looking out at the orange stripe on the 747, and then examining his own reflection. McKenna looked at his mirror image and then moved toward the glass until it appeared that he had only one brown eye, right in the middle of his forehead. His girlfriend, who I later



discovered was named Wendy, brought him a half eaten apple she'd scavenged from the trash can by the gift shop, and Terence ate it, core and seeds included. Wendy was pretty with her long and very straight blonde hair and straw hat. She kneeled down next to Terence and threw I-Ching coins onto the tile floor. She tossed out the I-Ching hexagram for disruption, and then put her hand on her hip as she read the hexagram's meaning aloud from a small blue hardback version of the Book of Changes:

"The Chinese character Ku represents a bowl in whose contents worms are breeding. This means decay. It has come about because the gentle indifference in the lower trigram has come together with the rigid inertia of the upper, and the result is stagnation. Since this implies guilt, the conditions embody a demand for removal of the cause. Hence the meaning of the hexagram is not simply 'what has been spoiled' but 'work on what has been spoiled,'" she said.

Sitting between McKenna and Chomsky in the airport, noticing the metal mesh panel erected between the passengers and the TWA desk, noticing the cool November light streaming in the huge pane glass windows, I considered the Ku Hexagram. This past moment required work. I adjusted my Time Box, turned the dial back twenty minutes but did not reset.

I watched Terence and Chomsky board their plane, and then, when the moment was over, I pressed the reset button.

## CRAWDADDY ONLINE

Jeff Morris

January, 5th, 2014 — 3:52 pm | 1,226 views | 0 recommendations  
| 14 comments

### Seeking Disruption

*Six in the beginning means:*

*Setting right what has been spoiled by the father.*

*If there is a son,*

*No blame rests upon the departed father.*

*Danger.*

*In the end, good fortune.*

— Book of Changes, Hexagram 18, Line One

I tried with Terence first, partly because I thought he would be more likely to believe me, but also because I wasn't as afraid of him as I was of Chomsky. I sat down next to him, reached over and grabbed his knapsack, dumped the contents onto the tile floor, then explained that I was quite sorry, and excuse me. I gathered up his possessions quickly, lined them up: one cassette recorder, a pink towel, an empty baggie that once held cannabis, a paperback edition of *The Naked Ape*, yellowed copy of a June 5th, 1968 edition of the New York Times, one pair of dingy white boxer shorts, a pair of olive colored socks, a pair of leather sandals that smelled like sweat, a pair of cut-off blue jeans, and a plastic poncho that smelled like a campfire and which was rolled up tight and secured by two rubber bands. I got down on hands and knees, took the Time Box out of my front pocket, and took a picture of it all. Then I reset, and approached McKenna again.

I was from the future. I was there to talk to him, to change

history, and I could prove it. I described the contents of his knapsack, but Terence wasn't as easy to convince as I'd expected. For one thing, he wasn't sure what he had in his blue nylon pack, so my explanation just came across as speculation that he could neither confirm nor deny.

I tried resetting the Box and bringing back my own knapsack. I told him I was from the future and then dumped the contents of my own bag for him to inspect. I showed McKenna a copy of his book *True Hallucinations*, an old copy of *Mondo 2000* from 1993, Daniel Pinchbeck's *Soft in the Head*, a netbook computer, an iPhone, and then the Time Box itself. I did not tell Terence that in my future he was dead, but did tell him that I was from 2013, and that nothing had happened, nothing would happen, on December 21st, 2012. Terence held the glossy magazine. The copy of *Mondo 2000* was an antique from 1993 and Terence gingerly traced the wavy lines that were emanating from a cartoon JFK head. Instead of getting his head blown off Kennedy was depicted, in cyberpunk collage style, as getting his mind blown. McKenna's name was on the cover next to the Lincoln convertible, but he just shook his head at this and asked to see my iPhone.

Terence's girlfriend was about six feet away and leaning against the pillar with the white courtesy phone. I approached her, informed her that I was from the future, and described the contents of Terence's knapsack for her.

"What do you want?" she asked.

I didn't really know what I wanted. Terence was playing Tetris on my iPhone, his girl was holding i-Ching coins, looking at me suspiciously, and so I told her the only thing I could tell her. I said that I'd come back in order to save the world.

The three of us ended up smoking hash from Wendy's knapsack in the airport parking lot. Marijuana makes me a bit loose lipped, maybe a little captious. Getting stoned with Terence and his chippy I found that I wanted to tell them everything I could about the next forty years. I'd tell them all about computers, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, tell them anything if it would keep them from leaning on each other like they were doing. He had his arm around her waist and was playing with the button on her jeans. I'd told them everything I could think of about the decade ahead of them. I told them about Jimmy Carter, Pet Rocks, and the Osmonds. I told them fifties conformity would reinvent itself as hedonism. I wanted them to see how far away they were from the root of their problems. They could trip out as much as they wanted, but the multicolored chaos they brought back would either be bleached out with Clorox or slapped on the Clorox bottle as a part of a rebranding campaign.

"When were you born?" McKenna asked.

"March 20th, 1970. In Pittsburgh."

"Have you gone to Pittsburgh? Have you seen yourself as a baby? Have you visited your mom and dad?" Wendy asked.

"I want to tell you about the Rubik's Cube," I said.

But McKenna wouldn't let go of his point. "You've come back to the O'Hare airport in 1971 in order to change history. You think I'm central to that?"

"Yes."

"Have you tried anything else?"





"Ummm. Yeah. No luck."

"Did you try killing Hitler?"

"No."

"Have you tried to stop the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?" Wendy asked.

"No. The Time Box won't let you do that."

"What?" Terence asked. "Why not?"

I handed him the manual, let him read the disclaimer for himself, but then tried to back pedal.

"It's not as hopeless as the manual makes it sound. You can change the settings," I said. "And you can think outside the usual box of history."

I told them that we needed to go somewhere to talk. We would fly to Berkeley the next day and confront Chomsky there. We needed more time. I'd explain everything, and then we could come up with a plan. I'd tell them how badly the world needed to be changed, all the reasons why: Donkey Kong, Bill Gates, the Internet, Osama bin Laden, and all the other reasons. But, once we got somewhere, when we arrived by cab at a Best Western near the airport, they booked a separate room for themselves. They told me that they'd see me in the morning.

"What about the Rubik's Cube?" I asked. "What about my glasses. See? They've got red ink in the frames."

"We want to be alone," McKenna said. "We'll talk over breakfast."

I went to my room and considered what it meant for me to be stoned in 1971. I lay down on the baby blue coverlet on my single bed, and looked up at the textured plaster ceiling. I sat up and hunted down the remote, found it velcroed to the dresser.

I watched *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson on a television with a fake wood panel under a channel dial.

"Did you know Richard Nixon is the only president whose formal portrait was painted by a police sketch artist?" Johnny asked the audience.

I stared at the yellow floral wallpaper, and then switched the Time Box off. The past blinked out, it was like turning off a light, and I found myself sitting behind my desk in my office. The yellow wallpaper was gone, as was the brown and white television.

The glass tabletop of my computer desk was smudged from where I'd kept my hands folded during my trip. I'd been in the past for hours. It was well past midnight, but the lights were still on. My wife had gone to bed without me, but she'd left the lights on so I wouldn't stumble over our son's Lego in the living room. I tiptoed across the orange carpet and found that along with a well-lit path she'd left a pillow and blanket for me on the living room sofa. When I lay down I found the metal bar underneath the cushions was bent. I sank into the couch, felt the metal bar press into my back, and considered what it meant that I was still stoned in the year 2013.

I sat up, searched for the remote, turned on the set, and found *The Tonight Show* with Conan O'Brien.

Next time around I was more proactive. We took Noam Chomsky out of the airport while his wife was in the restroom. Terence injected him with Ibogaine and as the visions came

on we led the professor to the escalator. We descended past a travel poster that featured a blonde Eskimo with shapely hips under fir trimmed pants and Chomsky started to laugh uncontrollably. The poster featured a phallic airplane in the left corner and the jet was aimed at the blonde Eskimo's crotch. The slogan on the poster read: ALASKA! IT'S NOT COLD INSIDE.

I explained what was going on once we were in the back of a cab. I held out the Time Box for Chomsky to examine, told him who I was and where I was from, or more to the point when I was from, and then introduced McKenna and Wendy.

Chomsky must have decided to humor me, or maybe it was the Ibogaine, but rather than object to the premise he seemed to take the idea of time travel in stride.

"Have you tried exposing the Gulf of Tonkin incident?" he asked.

"No."

"Have you tried killing Hitler?" McKenna asked the same questions every time.

"You can't do that. The Time Box comes with a 'you can't kill Hitler' disclaimer. History can't be altered like that. The past is fixed."

"You didn't tell us that before," Wendy said.

"You didn't ask."

"I..." Chomsky paused. "I believe I may be sick."

"Do you see spots?" Terence asked.

"Orange."

"He's going to throw up. Better roll down the window."

"Your friend going to get sick in my cab?" the Italian taxi driver asked. He turned to look at Chomsky and didn't like what he saw. We skidded to a stop.

The linguist huddled on hands and knees and let out a stream of green foam. He complained about snakes when he finished, and then rolled onto his back and stretched his arms out across the grassy median.

"Let me look at your time machine." Wendy took the Box from me and then held it out, at arm's length, as though she were considering whether she should throw it.

"Be careful with that."

"You've been playing with us," she said. "You're just playing games."

"Please be careful," I said.

We were near the Sears Tower, and I shielded my eyes with my right hand and looked up to see if I could find the top. The Tower just blended into the clouds, into the sky.

"Are you listening to me? I'm going to smash this. You'll be stuck here."

I tried to remember what the manual had said. Would a premature disconnect send me back or break me off in the stream? I was fairly sure I'd be sent back to the present, but getting stuck in 1972 wasn't my idea of a bad time. It wouldn't be a major adjustment, living without email and high def television. I could live in low definition.

"You want to start breaking things? Fine. But, all you'll do is destroy your future. The entire timeline will pop," I said.

I told them that I had a theory. The big historical moments couldn't be altered by actions from the future, but it might be





possible to make adjustments. I told them that I was looking for a seam in the fabric of history.

"What did you think this man could tell us?" McKenna asked.

"I wanted you to talk to him."

"You wanted him stoned?" McKenna asked.

"I'm experimenting," I said.

"Did you think this through at all?" Wendy asked.

"Would you just..." I paused, tried to think of what I should say next. "Just give me the Box."

She took her time handing it over, like it was a loaded gun, as if I might use it to hurt her, and when I had the Box back in my hands I confirmed her worst fears. I looked at Terence, said goodbye, and reset. That timeline was gone. The Wendy, Chomsky, and Terence McKenna that had travelled by cab from the airport to the Sears Tower were gone, and if I tried to go back I'd find younger and more naïve versions of them in their regular positions. The stage would be set just as it always was, with everyone frozen in place, ready for my directions, and always ready to snap back into place again.

## CRAWDADDY ONLINE

Jeff Morris

January, 7th, 2014 — 3:52 pm | 823 views | 0 recommendations | 2 comments

### The Butterfly Effect

*The butterfly effect is a metaphor that encapsulates the concept of sensitive dependence on initial conditions in chaos theory; namely that small differences in the initial condition of a dynamical system may produce large variations in the long term behavior of the system. The butterfly effect is a common trope in fiction when presenting scenarios involving time travel and with "what if" scenarios where one storyline diverges at the moment of a seemingly minor event resulting in two significantly different outcomes.*

— Wikipedia

I've lived in Gate 23 of the Chicago O'Hara airport, lived in the twenty-two minutes between 1:30pm and 1:52pm on November 16th, 1971 for the past six days. I spent New Year's Eve in the past, the same moment over and over again, and I used a yardstick to measure the spaces between Terence McKenna and Noam Chomsky, between Wendy and Carole. I measured out the spaces between the bit players too. After seventeen visits I knew all about them:

Sylvie's children were Jennifer and Troy. Troy was two years old and still in disposable diapers. Jennifer was six and wanted a quarter for the automat television across from the gate.

George was a businessman who, at fifty-two years of age and after two weeks traveling, wanted nothing more than quiet at the gate and a gin and tonic when he got to his seat.

The doctor from New York wearing an iZod shirt and khaki pants was named Craig, and his wife Ally was to meet him in Denver. Across from him a struggling ballet dancer named Cat stood with consciously good posture. She looked like a shorter version Grace Jones. The doctor and the ballet dancer were

seven feet apart.

Left to their own devices Cat and Craig would not speak to each other, but with some help they could be made to fall in love, or at least into lust. I discovered that I could drastically change the outcome of the moment just by asking Craig for the time; I could set off a chain reaction that led to him grunting and groaning and to Cat inadvertently flushing as she bent over for him in a toilet stall. There was such a thing as the butterfly effect. I asked Craig to look at his watch, and this led to him talking to Cat, and that led to him missing his flight because he couldn't hear the boarding call from the stall in the women's restroom.

I'd hit pay dirt, and the fact that nothing I did stopped Sylvie and George from their very loud public argument about her parenting didn't dampen my optimism a bit.

The first time that Craig checking his watch for me changed history I stuck around to see how it played out. I followed Craig and Cat to Oakland on Flight 82. I stayed the night in the same Best Western and watched Johnny Carson tell the same jokes in front of the same technicolored curtain. Cat and Craig were just two rooms down from me, and the next morning I sat two rows behind them on the flight out of O'Hare.

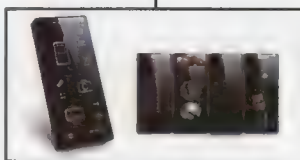
In Oakland I managed to keep up with Craig, but I lost track of Cat. They didn't get off the plane at the same time, and she went to the left while Craig turned right.

I managed to orchestrate the moment so that Craig and I took the same yellow taxi into Costa Contra County. The view out the left passenger window was reddish brown. Nimitz freeway was congested with blue Chevy sedans and orange Ford station wagons. We headed east, and Craig sat next to me with his soft hands folded in his lap. I stared at his silver Rolex and his cuff links. We didn't talk much during the drive.

On November 17th, 1971 Craig got out on Eastgate Street and walked up the drive to his little yellow ranch house. It was surely a starter home for him. His wife Kristin was waiting in the front yard, holding their young son Sam on her hip with one hand and holding a green rubber hose with a pistol shaped attachment in her other hand. She was squeezing out a stream. The taxi drove around the block and then I had it stop so I could get out and backtrack. I wanted to find out if there was going to be a consequence. Would Craig's infidelity disrupt his life? Would it impact life on Eastgate Street? It didn't have to be anything much, any lasting change in the outcome of his life would be enough to settle the matter.

Walking the cul-de-sacs and side streets of Concord in 1971 made me profoundly uneasy. I tried to bide my time in an unobtrusive way, but the way Craig's lawn was laid out, the way the grass looked, green and perfect, but with shards of red plastic strewn along near the sidewalk, was overwhelmingly nostalgic in a way I didn't much care for.

My memories of the seventies, of my childhood, are not universally positive. When I was seven years old I bashed my lip open by flipping my Schwinn Stingray and catching the curb with my face. Half of my mouth was swollen for what I remember to be months. Before that I'd spent most of my school days in the principal's office, on the green bench, because I wouldn't





tolerate smart aleck comments from the boy who lived up the block from me. I used to get in fights with this blond wunderkind who called me names like fag and retard when the teacher wasn't listening, and I used to lose. But once I smashed my face even the wunderkind took pity on me.

1977 was the year I caught my parents making it on their waterbed. Well maybe they didn't really have a waterbed, but Barry Manilow's 'Weekend in New England' really was playing on their clock radio. The volume was very low but I recognized the song. I won't tell you what they were doing specifically, but they were doing it on top of the sheets and not like married people at all. It made an impression. So now I associate Barry Manilow, wall to wall carpeting, hanging lamps, beanbag chairs, really the whole era with this primal scene.

Looking at Craig's lawn I knew what the bits of plastic were. He'd run over the launch gyro for his son's Evil Knievel Stunt Bike set with the lawn mower. I spotted the white handle for the toy's crank in the space between the lawn and the sidewalk. It was stuck down there, in the muck, and I stepped over it, into the yard. The awful feeling of trespassing tingled through me, up my spine. The bad feeling of it settled somewhere between my temples.

I stood behind the rhododendron, peeked in the front window, and saw Mrs Craig, or perhaps her name was Ms Craig, sitting on their plaid sofa. She was wearing a plush off-white robe, and her bare feet dangled down and touched the asymmetrical orange and brown rectangles that decorated their vinyl floor. She was nursing the littlest Craig, and Craig Jr was sitting next to her and watching a woman with long straight black hair, thin and small-chested, sing on TV. I waited in the bushes with my hand on the Time Box, ready to press the reset button if I was caught, but waiting for Craig to come back into the TV room. I wanted to see him with his wife, wanted to see if there would be a strain between them. Anything remotely visible, even if I just imagined it, would do, but Craig didn't make his entrance soon enough.

The boy stood up to turn off the TV when the woman on television stopped singing. Thinking about it now the woman was probably Cher. Then he turned around to face his mother again and instead of walking back or continuing on with whatever other activity might be waiting for him, (maybe putting his eye out with a pair of glass clackers) he stopped in his tracks. I'd clearly been seen. When Ms Craig looked over in my direction I didn't wait for an outcome, but reset the Time Box.

There were a number of options still open to me at Gate 23, and quite a number that I'd already tried, but that were probably worth trying again. I needed to focus on McKenna more, or make sure that Sylvie found a quarter so that her daughter could watch the automat television. Sylvie needed a moment of peace.

If I smoked hash with Terence and Wendy while Chomsky explained the Pentagon Papers to the girl behind the check-in desk and made sure to ask Craig for the time on my way down to the parking lot I could get nearly everything going at once. And if I tried breaking into the olive colored Oldsmobile Cutlass on level three I'd find that the door was unlocked and

that the key was still in the ignition. I could get the radio going. Then Terence, Wendy and I could take a spin in the seventies sunshine. Donovan on AM and with the driver's side window rolled down was a fun diversion, but we never really went anywhere that way.

I could set up a dozen, a hundred, changes. I could make the girl behind the check-in counter cry, and I could make sure that Craig's wife found out about Cat. I could scream and yell and throw one of the orange chairs through the plate glass windows and out onto the Tarmac, but I couldn't change the direction of history.

When I asked Craig for the time I thought about the film *Kramer vs. Kramer* with Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep. I thought about how everyone's personal life, all the marriages and nuclear families and folk groups, would be fractured in the next decade. And thirty years after that nobody would even have a personal life to break. There were just Facebooks and smart phones and double super sized depressions.

I sat between Noam Chomsky and Terence McKenna and watched as the girl behind the counter walked out from behind the carpeted barricade at the front of the gate. She opened the door for the air-bridge onto the 747 that would take the passengers west. I listened to her announce that the elderly and those passengers boarding with small children should line up, and I waited. Terence took another bite from the apple core Wendy had given him. Chomsky folded the Financial Times in half

and glanced up at the door the girl had left open.

When the 747 backed away from the gate and made its way onto the runway I looked around the empty gate, at all the empty orange chairs, at the analog clock hanging above the handrail, and thought about starting over one more time.



## CRAWDADDY ONLINE

Jeff Morris

January 9th, 2014 — 3:17 pm | 678 views | 0 recommendations | 1 comment

### A Red Wedge Meets an Orange Teardrop: Progress in Gate 23

*A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixately contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.*

— Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*

I dropped the Time Box as I stepped beyond the metal railing that circled the gate, and I watched as the Box bounced off the curved orange plastic of a chair, into the air, and then



back down to the hard tile floor. The Time Box impacted with a clang and the world changed. The past dimmed, and then everything became clear, angular, and pure.

The gate for Flight 2012 appeared as one perfect black box, and when I turned and looked through the empty space where a window had been the 747 on the runway appeared as a slightly smaller red square. The world of 1971 had shifted into fundamental geometric forms. Noam Chomsky was a partial circle, a red wedge, and Terence McKenna was a black teardrop that flowed slowly across the olive colored rectangle that was the wall behind him.

Standing in an abstract past I wondered if I could possibly be looking at the seam, at a way to get at the under infrastructure of the moment.

Noam Chomsky punctured the white circle around the girl behind the TWA desk. She was a pink rectangle.

In this broken past I could apprehend Chomsky directly, and I could see how he changed shape depending on the moment. He was a red wedge that could shift into a yellow rectangle whereas McKenna was always a teardrop.

I looked at my hands and they appeared as pink circles on a blank white background. They would move at my mental command, but the idea of holding onto something was incomprehensible.

Worse than the visual manifestation of this moment, worse than the pure forms, was the rigidity I felt in my limbs, and the momentum of my perceptions. Everything felt thin and insubstantial and yet, at the same time, everything was of consequence. I was watching the universe work itself out on the meta-level, apprehending how my own thoughts were stolen or directed. Seeing myself in the mechanism that is existence.

I got down on my hands and knees, on triangles and squares, and I searched amongst the lines, the angles, the layers, for the Time Box. I had to reset. I was panicking along a straight line. I looked at the orange chairs and they appeared as a series of thin tangerine colored rectangles. I wondered how it might be possible to look underneath.

The past was two-dimensional. It was a perceptual desert. There was nothing but the red wedge of Chomsky, nothing but tangerine rectangles and the straight line of my fear. Everything in 1971, in this new pure perception, came to me as a feeling, and I moved the feelings – the circles and squares – around an empty plane. I could change Chomsky from a red wedge into a yellow rectangle and then back again.

I reached under the chair. I closed my eyes and felt for the off switch. I reached out and found the Time Box.

The universe seemed brittle all around me, and I knew I could break it into pieces if I wanted. I could rearrange it, yes, but I could also destroy it. It would require no effort to tear McKenna or Wendy in half, and Chomsky was nothing but a paper thin idea.

What was most terrifying about the hallucination the Time Box was broadcasting was how familiar it was. I wasn't living with an orange tear drop and yellow rectangle, but remembering these things. I was remembering my own true form.

I wanted history with the stage sets intact. If I had to give

up on bringing the red wedge of Chomsky into the realm of McKenna's teardrop, if I had to give up on changing history in order to stay in the real world with textures and faces and people and things, it was a sacrifice worth making.

I turned the Box off.

## CRAWDADDY ONLINE

Jeff Morris

January 9th, 2014 – 3:17 pm | 678 views | 0 recommendations | 1 comment

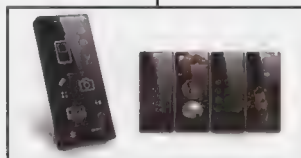
### The Future

*"The future of the human race lies in the exploration and making explicit of the contents of the human imagination."*

– Terence McKenna

*"I think it only makes sense to seek out and identify structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination in every aspect of life, and to challenge them. That includes political power, ownership and management, relations among men and women, parents and children, our control over the fate of future generations (the basic moral imperative behind the environmental movement, in my view), and much else. Naturally this means a challenge to the huge institutions of coercion and control: the state, the unaccountable private tyrannies that control most of the domestic and international economy, and so on."*

– Noam Chomsky



Last night I transferred all of the photos from Gate 23 to my computer desktop. A 747 painted green, a photo of an ashtray filled with glass beads and butts, the stewardess wearing her brown pantyhose with the run in the left legging, and so on.

I closed the window with Carole Chomsky; she was staring at the Time Box from the front seat of a yellow taxi, her brown hair pulled up on her head in a tight bun, and her eyes focused and serious behind a pane of rain speckled glass. I closed the window that contained the image of a yellow dotted line that led to the emergency exits in baggage claim, then closed the window with Cat's blue polyester dress laid out neatly across the tile floor of the women's restroom. I could see Craig's loafers, out of focus but there, in the background. I closed the window on Noam Chomsky in an orange plastic chair. But when the face looking back at me from the computer screen was my own I stopped.

I was standing next to a support beam by the blue check-in desk at Gate 23. I was wearing my green gortex raincoat in the photo, and had a few days growth of grey speckled beard. I looked tired, much more worn out than the innocents all around me who were in their own time, but I was smiling. In the photo I'm pointing at something outside the frame. I looked like a movie director on a set. I was unkempt, obviously not meant to be onscreen.

Even this was something I could undo. All I had to do to get rid of the self in the photo was to turn on the Time Box again. The rest of history was impossible to control, but I had complete dominion over those twenty minutes in 1971. I stared at



myself, studied my own image, and decided I would erase it. I said goodbye to the version of me on the screen.

On my last trip to the airport I tried to change everyone together and at the same time. If up until that point I'd rearranged the moment piece by piece, redirecting each person's attention separately, my new approach would take on the totality of the moment. I would capture all of their attention at once.

"Flight 23 to Boston will be boarding in fifteen minutes," the stewardess spoke the words into the microphone. "Departure time is 4:35."

I stood by my pillar and smiled again. I imagined someone, Craig or Carole or Cat, taking my picture, but there was nobody aiming the Time Box in my direction. Even so I lifted my hand to point to a place outside the frame.

I stepped up to Shelly, the girl in the short orange airline uniform, and leaned down to speak into her microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen," I started.

"Sir," Shelly objected. "You can't –"

"Ladies and gentlemen, Flight 2012 is cancelled due to a future calamity. In fact, I can tell you that in the future many of you are already dead. Please remain calm. Do exactly as I say or somebody will get hurt," I said. "Move only when I tell you to move. If anybody tries to be a hero I'll delete them. Don't try anything stupid." I took the Time Box from the inner pocket of my gortex raincoat and held it up so everyone could see. "This is a nuclear device. I can destroy time with it. I can, if I have to, erase all of you."

"It's a bomb," Shelly said. She started rubbing her legs together, sort of jogging in place, as if she thought I ought to have grabbed her and she ought to be struggling.

The Time Box had more than forty years of future history stored inside. The new upgrade allows the user to broadcast a wireless signal to a conventional television set. The signal is digital, but a converter is built-in and this allows the consumer to utilize the Box in the past. Most users just opt to watch the tiny screen on the Box itself, most are casual historians, but I'd picked a spot, found the moment when I wanted to be, and the fact that the Box would work with a TV built in 1968 was a big plus.

I moved the crew and passengers of Flight 2012 to the bar. I turned on the Time Box, switched on the RCA Solid State Technicolor dream box above the Jack Daniels, and then started my history lesson. If Terence and Chomsky could not be pushed into a kind of joint effort, if there could be no rational synthesis, then they would at least have to face their future together, even if only this one time. Even if it would then be erased.

I started with Ronald Reagan.

"Who is that?" Cat asked.

Craig turned toward Cat. "It's Ronald Reagan from California."

Noam Chomsky drank a sip from a green bottle of beer. He peeled the label slowly with his thumb and watched the screen while Carole kept her arms wrapped tight around the carry-on bag in her lap. McKenna sat next to him and took a sip from the canteen he'd had with him in the Amazon. The canteen contained poorly mixed Tang. Most of the orange powder had

collected as sediment on the bottom of the flask.

After Reagan I showed them the footage of the 1984 space shuttle disaster and followed this with starving children in Ethiopia. Next came the fall of the Berlin Wall followed by clips from the original *Tron*.

Terence was eating peanuts. Chomsky held the label from his beer between his index finger and his thumb. Craig yawned and stretched and then moved to put his arm around Cat. Cat, in turn, picked up a menu from the bar and read through the mixed drinks available.

"Put down the menu," I shouted. "Pay attention."

Watching the future with them I saw that there was quite a lot of what was terrible about it that was enmeshed in that moment in Gate 23. Watching it while Noam Chomsky fiddled with the wet paper label from his beer bottle made me blush. Was I naïve enough to think that if people from 1971 could be made to see the collapse of the Twin Towers, if they were forced to witness the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, that knowing about these things in advance would somehow make them act differently?

Even as I brought them their future as an act of terrorism, even as I was satisfied with how it all fit together seamlessly on the screen, I realized that nothing I could show them would shock. Noam Chomsky and Terence McKenna were already adjusted to living in a society that presented itself as a crisis.

When a man in a bear suit had less than optimal results down amongst the luxury hotels on Wall Street, when Madonna put her hand on her belly, when Ronald Reagan waved and waved as multicolored balloons came down around him, my embarrassment grew. It was just another happy and obvious critique. There were Golden Arches and

billions served. The women on the *Love Boat* wore tiny bikinis as they swayed back and forth across the promenade. They arched their backs as a hypno-wheel turned. And when Ronald Reagan's beautiful teeth were knocked out in a massive auto disaster, when Barack Obama's rear end collision made Rob Lowe come I turned to look and found that Noam Chomsky looked bored. Even when he saw himself on television, even when there were a hundred screens on the screen, and they all showed him as a talking head, even when the women on the *Love Boat* poured water on themselves and their skin glistened, neither Chomsky nor McKenna reacted.

Their deadly future was shown as a rock video, and they were ready for it.

The hallway outside the airport bar was still filled with sunlight when I had everyone shuffle out. The history lesson was over and I watched Terence and Chomsky shrug at each other. I held the Time Box over my head and threatened destruction again. I had the ten of them line up in front of orange bucket seats in the hallway outside Gate 18, and asked them to raise their hands to answer my questions. I waited as they did as I asked, and was pleased when Chomsky and McKenna ended up next to each other in line, but I was interrupted before I could get my first question out. I was going to ask them if they felt that what they saw on the screen was separate from them, separate from their lives, but instead of asking anything I reeled





forward. A stinging sensation stopped my thoughts and my right leg stopped supporting my weight. I fell forward, hit the tile hard, and rolled over in time to see an explosion of dust erupt from the pillar I'd been leaning on a second earlier.

Somebody was shooting at me. I scrambled to pick up the Time Box; I'd dropped it when I fell. Then I forced myself to my feet and turned toward the panes of glass that separated me from the Tarmac. There were motorcycle cops out there with guns drawn. They were still wearing their helmets and they had pistols. I stood shocked, and then wondered why they hadn't fired again.

Noam Chomsky was standing next to me at the window, looking down with me at the scene.

"You're in trouble," he said.

"Looks like it."

"Is that really a nuclear device," he asked.

I told him that I wasn't sure what it ran on exactly, but that it had something to do with quarks which, as far as I understood things, were subatomic particles.

Terence McKenna stepped back to let some policemen in body armor past, and I imagined what it would be like to get arrested. An absurd image flashed through my mind. In the instant it took for the SWAT team to get down on their knees and take aim at me I pictured myself riding on a police motorbike, only Chomsky was driving. I had my arms around Chomsky's waist and, as I heard the men cock their rifles, I saw Terence McKenna pull up beside us on his bike. We waved to him, and smiled. I felt a fly hit my lips, maybe a dragonfly or a flying beetle, and in my hallucination I swallowed reflexively. I imagined myself swallowing a bug, and then looked down at the spot on my leg where the bullet had hit me. There was a great deal of blood oozing out.

If I stayed in 1971 I would die there.

Looking from the SWAT team to Noam Chomsky I saw flecks of dust suspended in the air. The future I was about to go back to was going to be just the same as it ever was. I hit the reset button.

## CRAWDADDY ONLINE

Jeff Morris

February 6th, 2014 – 5 pm | 20,213 views | 34 recommendations | 823 comments

### In the Garden: Easybloom 3.0

*The EasyBloom Plant/Topsoil Sensor was created for anyone who has experienced the frustration of not knowing what plant will survive in a specific location or anyone who has been unable to figure out just how the topsoil is contaminated when a crop fails. This technology is essential for those who are adding to their caloric intake with a kitchen garden, as well as for industrial farmers.*

– EasyBloom Brochure, circa 2012

I want to thank everyone who sent emails of concern and sympathy during the last two weeks, and to assure all of my readers that while I don't have full mobility yet, I am feeling much better. I am walking again, although with a cane. I'm mostly just

puttering around the house and garden these days. Domestic life can be quite pleasant, there is plenty of domestic tech to consider, and quite a lot of it has political or social implications.

For instance, I received my EasyBloom kit in the mail on Friday. The cardboard box that arrived with its orange flower logo and curved lines had a sort of kindergarten quality to it, but the peach colored sheet of molded plastic that held all the pieces together inside might have been more appropriately used with a medical or feminine hygiene product. The yellow plastic pedals that clip on the top worked all right, but all in all the product feels insubstantial. I haven't bothered to figure out whether it actually can collect data, but have only observed how it makes me feel about my garden when I stick the green metal prongs into the soil. While the device is supposed to lend yuppie legitimacy to the kitchen gardens that more and more Americans are relying on for vegetables in this era of shipping hazards and failed harvests, to me setting a piece of plastic next to my lemon cucumbers just manages to reinforce the reality that my garden box is semi-toxic. Looking at this cheerful plastic phallus with its umbrella top I start to distrust the whole enterprise. Who wants food grown on top of a landfill?

Another example of a domestic product would be the new iStick I received on Tuesday and promptly stuck in my ear. It's true that the sound quality is incredible. I could hear Carole King's every breath as she crooned about how it was too late and how we should just stop trying. Listening to music from the 70s was

probably a mistake. I was afraid to flip the switch and get the video feed going. I told myself that I didn't want to mess with my optic nerve, but I think I just didn't want to see Carole with long wavy hair and in a wide collared pink blouse. I'd spent enough time with that era's fashions.

"It's too late now darling," Carole sang. I had to agree.

When the song was over I had some difficulty removing the device. I'd wedged it in too deep and couldn't just pluck it out the way the instructions indicated. After several attempts with no success I thought I was going to end up in the emergency room again, but my wife suggested we try using tweezers.

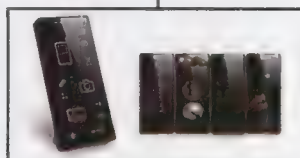
Some of you might have seen my appearance on the O'Brien show yesterday. We talked about Gate 23 and about how today's Chomsky reacted to my blog entries. Apparently he was reluctant to comment, but he did say that he felt that people ought to organize in the present rather than fantasize about the past. He views the Time Box as nothing more than a novelty, another virtual world, like television, and while he's technically or theoretically wrong, actually existing time travel does work like television, especially in retrospect. Chomsky is, as always, spot on.

I got more into it on Conan's show than he probably wanted, and I felt bad about how unfunny it all was. One thing I really wanted to ask him – Chomsky, not Conan – was if the past is just like television, then what is the present like?

Maybe the present is an EasyBloom flower, or an iStick that gets jammed in your ear and won't stop broadcasting. Whatever it is, it seems to be all we've got. One big present stretching out infinitely behind and in front of us.

I probably won't be getting more products to review by next week, but if I do I'll let you know.

Catch you later... ■





# INTELLECTUAL

## MICHAEL R. FLETCHER



### KAPECI, DEEP COVER NATU OPERATIVE

Dhaka, the capital of Gano Projatontri Bangladesh. With a population of thirteen million the city was a madhouse. Buses and plastic Tata Kei Cars spewed thick smoke from their struggling two cylinder aluminum engines. The heat and pollution were stifling and the cacophony of car horns relentless. This place was more than enough to drive you mad. It was dirty. It was overcrowded. It was dangerous.

I loved it.

As a deep cover agent for a Corporate Espionage Black Ops unit with a North American Trade Union charter I enjoyed a great many advantages, social and otherwise. Unfortunately NATU law didn't apply here and I had all the political clout of any one of the city's half-million rickshaw drivers. Maybe less. Scratch that. *Definitely* less.

Due to a sparsity of legal constraints Dhaka had become a hotbed of 'grey market' Research and Development. Officially the Pensiero Corporation's Dhaka facility was researching advanced biological computers for medical usage. Little DNA spies looking for naughty chromosomes. Everyone born in anything better than a third world country had a bio-med, me included. But Pensiero had strayed into far darker corners than those advertised in their glossy investor's reports. They'd been purchasing children, stolen from the crush of Dhaka's crowded streets, for use in organic computer research.

I'd infiltrated the facility. I'd seen the neat rows of shucked brains floating in their support tanks. All I had to do now was connect the dots, steal the research, and topple Pensiero. But there was a problem.



# PROPERTY





**ANOMIE, PENSIERO RESEARCH SCIENTIST**

My body kicked me awake with no regard for the fact that I desperately needed at least two more hours' sleep.

Awake before the alarm. Sad.

I tried not to think about the day ahead. I tried not to think at all. Just go back to sleep.

Was it Friday?

"Thursday," I muttered, pushing a hand through tangled blond hair.

Luckily, you are only crazy if you talk to yourself in public. As long as you do it in the privacy of your own home you're perfectly sane. My mother's mantra, though it was my father who talked to himself.

I surrendered to the inevitable and rolled out of bed. I'm in my mid-twenties, have never exercised a day in my life, and am petite and slender. Almost muscled for my small frame. My father always said it was good genes. I guess he would know, he picked them.

I was fat as a child. My parents, wealthy software engineers who thought they could debug me the same way they fixed code, decided to 'cure' me of that social embarrassment. A little recompiling of the recombinant.

They upgraded my biomed. My urges and hungers were monitored and strictly controlled. Looking at sweets made me feel ill. I could tell how many calories were in a piece of Texas-shaped-chicken-by-product by looking at it and my body wouldn't let me eat a calorie more than it needed. My parents never understood why I didn't thank them.

I'd happily kill them both for a chocolate truffle.

The biomed was just another step in my parents' life-plan for their only child. Prenatal genetic manipulation came first. Then a lifetime regimen of advanced nootropic drugs, cholinergic receptors, and acetylcholinesterase inhibitors. For my twentieth birthday they paid for my Memory Socket surgery. The socket wound monomolecular filaments throughout my frontal and parietal lobes, basal ganglia, and hippocampus. Memories created while a Memory Plug was inserted in the socket were scrambled and could only be accessed when that same plug was worn.

I think they saw me as a favoured investment in their portfolio.

Why would anyone *want* this? The socket, in combination with my education, guaranteed me a job in pretty much any cutting-edge research facility. Those software engineers certainly understood the importance of Intellectual Property Rights. They wanted everything for their daughter and pushed hard to get it.

Oh how they spoiled their baby.

I slipped into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt and padded barefoot into the kitchen. Breakfast was a single raspberry flavoured bar of seven wholesome grains [150 calories] and a cup of semi-sweetened tea with two tablespoons of 1% milk [32 calories]. My biomed ensured that I ate many small meals throughout the day. I was never quite hungry, never quite satisfied. Last week I'd managed to fight past the biomed's programmed revulsion to buy a Snickers bar [57 grams, 271 calories] without throwing up. I had been unable to actually *eat* the Snickers. It still sits, calling my name in its velvet caramel voice, on the

counter where I dropped it. Thinking about it made my stomach twist and my mouth water. It was confusing.

As an adult I could have had the biomed reprogrammed but a lifetime of parental programming (combined with the biomed's more insidious Pavlovian training) fostered a deep-rooted fear of being fat. I lost sleep to nightmares of gaining weight without its constant guidance.

By 7:30am I'd laced up my hiking boots and, air-filter mask in place, was walking to work. Head down I waded through sweltering smog and poverty. I ignored the supplicating hands of beggar-urchins and the holographic advertisements which overlaid the real world in a three-dimensional assault on my senses. To the north I could see the Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban, the National Assembly Building of Bangladesh. From this distance it looked like an old Candu nuclear reactor.

Most mornings I travelled *with* the crowd, a minnow funnelled towards my destination in a river of sweating humanity. Today I fought my way upstream. A gaunt family of six ran past, stained air-filter masks in place. Mom was clutching a dead koala bear. They were being chased by another equally thin family. This was odd. Even for Dhaka.

I glanced down at the computer installed in my arm as a teen. "What the hell is going on?"

Google Interactive verified my GPS location, checked local news sources, public and private, and touched base with other GI users in the area.

"There's a food riot," GI told me. "The public zoo is being mobbed and animals stolen for food."

"Seriously?"

In response it showed me pictures – uploaded from cell phones and other GI users – of rioters slaughtering zoo animals. Most of the pictures had been taken by the people doing the killing.

"The army is on the way," GI said. "The Google Safety Recommendation is to move to a safer distance." It suggested several routes avoiding both the mob and approaching military police. Somewhere to the east I heard the crack of small arms fire.

I arrived at Pensiero a few minutes before 8am. The guard nodded distractedly as I entered the building and approached his desk.

"Morning," I said, stating the obvious in the way that we do.

He nodded again and pushed the retina scanner towards me. "Name."

I answered, staring into the scanner. Then a DNA sample. Finger prints. Voice pattern and stress analyser.

"What do you call a wookie with an ass fetish?" the guard asked.

"What?"

"Just measuring neural activity." He looked embarrassed and shrugged. "I don't write this stuff."

After the security hallway, which included a body search that reminded me how long I'd been single, I was allowed to enter Pensiero's hallowed blue halls. A bored Bangladeshi woman in a Khaleeji-embroidered Abaya slid a small plastic plug through a rotating section of bomb-proof window. The plug looked remarkably like the hearing aids of the previous century.

I hesitated for a moment before inserting the plug in the Memory Socket hidden under the flesh-toned dust cover just



behind my right ear. There were always rumours. I'd heard that some plugs held instructions and could tell the brain to produce and store neurotransmitters like dopamine and Gamma-AminoButyric Acid, giving the subject heightened control over their central nervous system. The thought of letting people mess with the inner workings of my mind gave me the screaming willies. My parents had done enough of that, thank you.

I frowned at the Memory Plug resting in the palm of my right hand and thought about Gamma-AminoButyric Acid which played a role in neuronal excitability and regulating muscle tone.

"GABA GABA," I said and plugged in.

Blink.

Standing in the same blue hallway holding the plug in my left hand. A different Bangladeshi woman sat behind the bomb-proof glass, staring expectantly at me. I dropped the plug into the receiving tray and headed for home. The security gauntlet was just as demanding on the way out. Strange questions, more pokes and prods. By the time I made it out of the building I was stumbling with exhaustion. Ten hours had passed in that blink. My arms and legs ached, heavy with pooling lactic acid.

#### KAPECI, DEEP COVER NATU OPERATIVE

I was royally fucked.

The man I'd spent the last year 'turning' got greedy. It would have been bad enough had he just demanded more from me and my NATU handlers, but he wasn't that bright. Were he one of the plug-wearing drones working in the research wing I could have simply knocked him on the head, popped his plug out, and destroyed it. One good stomp and all memory of our dealings would be gone.

Would that be murder? I don't think so. He would still be alive, but whatever differences existed between Plugged him and Unplugged him would be destroyed. Sure, after years of being a Plugged employee a person might become radically different than he was, but it still wasn't murder. Right?

Unfortunately he was high enough up the food chain he didn't wear a plug. Why this was always the case with upper management is a mystery. If anyone knew enough to be dangerous it was the old white guys at the top, the same ones who thought themselves too damned important to wear plugs.

What really pissed me off, what really got my soy-goat, was that this guy was perfect. He knew enough to sink Pensiero and he was a self-serving greedy son of a bitch. So why the hell was I surprised when the greedy bastard turned out to be untrustworthy? Apparently he figured that if he was going to sell Pensiero secrets to me, he might as well sell them to *everybody*. He was greedy *and* an idiot. Lovely combination.

The double-crossing bastard spent all of Thursday in boardroom meetings and I couldn't get anywhere near him. It was frustrating and scary. Had he already told the other buyers about me? Hell. He'd sell me out in a second and, depending on where the opposition chose to come after me...yeah...royally fucked.

To make matters worse the greedy idiot sent a couple of his security staff to scare me with a little rude language and macho posturing. Maybe he thought I'd just give up and go away. Not

my style. Instead I took a few seconds out of my busy day to beat the hell out of these two and sent them whimpering back to their boss. I wasn't too worried this would come back to haunt me as the security personnel would unplug at the end of the day and go home wondering why they hurt so much. I sent a friendly message along with the limping goons.

"If you fuck with me I will kill you."

#### ANOMIE, PENSIERO RESEARCH SCIENTIST

Thursday evening.

I got home, kicked my shoes into the corner, changed into a pair of comfortable shorts and a T-shirt, and collapsed onto the sofa. My arms and legs were covered in dark bruises but the pain was already beginning to fade. I barely even felt stiff any more, just bone-weary exhausted. Things tingled down south and my mind wandered to the kind of subjects that told me I'd be spending time with Mister Vibrator in the near future. Unless I did something about it.

My last 'relationship' lasted less than three months and the sex had just started getting good. We'd finally made it past that awkward 'embarrassed about our bodies' stage and could focus on figuring out what made each others' eyes roll. I hadn't even managed an orgasm in the first two months, though not for a lack of trying on his part. Sadly, it was doomed from day one.

I was working at a government-funded research facility and he worked for a Multi-National Financial Institution. Memory Plugs were a necessity for both jobs. We'd meet up each evening and try and have that conversation all couples have at the end of each day.

"How was your day?" he'd ask.

I'd shrug and laugh. "Dunno. Yours?"

"Dunno."

If you can't bitch about your workday, what the hell else are you going to talk about?

There were days when I'd return from work sporting bruises and he'd make fun of how clumsy I was and we'd laugh about it. And then he came home smelling of expensive perfume. I made some joke about him going to a strip club at lunch with the boys and he flatly denied it. Unlike me, he unplugged for his lunch breaks.

"Well then?" I asked.

He shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't know. I have no idea what goes on at work." If he meant it to be a joke it fell flat.

That was it. My doubts ate at me and within a week we split up. It wasn't just that I feared what *he* was up to while plugged in, I couldn't be sure that *my* behaviour was any better. I'd spent the last year plugged in eight to twelve hours a day. I didn't even know if I had friends at work. Christ, I could have been shagging someone every lunch hour and staying Plugged just to protect my Unplugged self.

How can you have a normal relationship when you don't even know who you are most of your waking day?

That was two years ago and I hadn't dated since. Pensiero was careful to let us out one at a time. They didn't want us meeting up after work and having Unplugged contact. I don't know why – put it down to corporate paranoia – it isn't like we could talk about what went on at the office.





So here I was in Bangladesh. I'd never met any of my co-workers and I rarely went out. I made a decision.

I picked out a slinky black dress with sleeves to cover the bruises. I wasn't going out to look for sex, I was going to find somewhere with people and music. Just expose myself – so to speak – to the attentions of the opposite sex. I found some fishnet stockings that slimmed my thighs. Yeah, yeah, at 112 pounds I understood that I didn't really have fat thighs. When you are dealing with leftover childhood trauma the facts don't matter. I found a bra that actually managed to give me some cleavage – it's not about sex, I just wanted to look good – and some earrings that suited my dark eyes.

Hair up.

Different pair of shoes.

Hair down.

Another pair of shoes.

A long necklace to draw the eye to my –

Ah screw it, who was I kidding?

Google Interactive talked to my biomed to see what kind of mood I was likely in – probably noted an abundance of hormones – and suggested several dance clubs based on its findings. Most of them looked a little too scary for what was to be my first real sampling of Dhaka night-life. I scanned the list until I saw one populated mostly by other foreigners in Bangladesh on Corporate Work Visas. I left my condo and flagged down a rickshaw-bike driven by a boy who looked far too malnourished to drag me to the Club District in the Shahbag neighbourhood. Along the way GI kept suggesting alternate routes but I ignored it and let the boy take whatever route he wanted. If it cost me a few extra Euros, I didn't much care.

The Rumpus Room was hidden on a small side-street between the University of Dhaka and the tent city that Ramna Park had become. The pristine white bathroom-tile walls echoed with the wealth, glitter, and frenzied desperation of people who weren't sure who they really were. Women wore their hair down and men wore their collars up but I still knew the Sockets were there.

As I pushed my way through the crowd I wondered how many of these people were co-workers. At the bar I had two choices: I could order an alcoholic beverage, if I first convinced myself I had no intention of drinking it, or I could order a diet cola. My parents didn't want me to be fat but apparently didn't care if I died of cancer.

"Diet cola," I told the bartender, a young Bangladeshi with lively eyes and a silk shirt hanging unbuttoned to display his chest and flat stomach.

"We're all out of the left-handed stuff," he said to my cleavage. I shrugged and he passed me a lukewarm glass of flat diet cola. "Fifteen Euros," he told me.

Over the next few hours I danced with a few cute guys and managed to score some Afghani weed which the biomed didn't have any problems with. My mouth felt like I'd been sucking dusty cotton swabs and my tongue was thick and dry. None of that mattered. I was dancing and I was high.

Later, after I'd taken a break and downed a few more overpriced cancer-pops, I checked Google Interactive. Most of the people here were on the GI network and were taking pictures of themselves and the people in the bar they were interested in

meeting. IMs sailed about the room like biodegradable confetti at a wedding. After pointing out that, due to my limited social interaction of late it couldn't promise its usual accuracy, GI gave me backgrounds on a few guys it thought I might like. It showed me their most recent hook-ups and the scores they'd received from previous dates. Privacy is for old people.

I had narrowed GI's suggested selection down to three possibilities when I was pinged. No IM was attached which was a little odd and caught my attention. I checked the guy's GI stats and was amazed to find that he had no registered information and was the oldest person in the bar by thirty years. Even GI seemed a little appalled. I was going to ignore him when I noticed his name, *Gedanke Geschäft*, which, if my German was correct, roughly translated as *Thought Business*. *Pensiero* meant *Thought* in Italian. Was there a connection? Had someone from work recognized me?

What the heck. I decided I'd talk to him and bail if he got creepy. I instructed GI not to include this in my social networking profile as I didn't want it making the assumption I was into mysterious older men.

I found him alone at a small round table covered in empty Corona bottles. Hopefully they weren't all his. He had a full head of dark hair but his eyes gave away his age. His suit was expensive and grey. The fingers of his right hand drummed nervously on the table top and his left hand rested on his lap under the table.

"Gedanke Geschäft?" I asked.

He snorted derisively and stared at me for a moment. It wasn't the usual look that guys gave me, it was more like he was weighing consequences. I suddenly found myself thinking about that left hand under the table and the way he'd shifted his position as I'd approached.

"You Plugged?" he asked.

Afraid to open my mouth, I nodded. I don't know why. Maybe I hoped I'd learn something. The Afghani weed wasn't helping.

Gedanke finally nodded, his mind made up. "Mistakes were made. I have what you want but we have to be careful. There's another interested party who is *very* dangerous." With a start I realized he looked more than a little scared. "Contacting them had been a mistake but it's too late now. We deal with what is. We have to move up the schedule." Gedanke's eyes were pleading. "You have to get me out of here."

Oh. Fuck. I was *way* too high for this.

"Tomorrow evening," Gedanke said. "My place." He sent me his address, a private residence on Fular Road just south of the university. "Bring the rest of it and then I am out."

Gedanke stood and walked away without another word. I watched him fade into the crowd. Had he slid something from his left hand into his jacket pocket?

"What the hell?" I asked the vacated chair.

I could not possibly be dumb enough to be selling *Pensiero* secrets. Could he have mistaken me for someone else? He hadn't actually said anything specifically about me or *Pensiero*.

I lost all interest in dancing, being high, and the possibility of casual sex. I pinged the cab company for a real taxi and was home in ten minutes.

Friday Morning.



Awake before the alarm. Again. I rolled out of bed and groaned. My head felt like someone was trying to chainsaw their way through my cerebral cortex. That Afghani weed must have been laced with something potent because I could remember some pretty messed up dreams. The night was a blur of Eurotrash dance beats spiced with a hint of curry.

Gedanke Geschäft. Thought Business. Not a dream.

I walked to work and the streets were quiet and stained with the blood of yesterday's food riot. GI kept me away from the few hot spots still smouldering with violence.

As I walked I scolded myself under my breath. "You will go to work, plug in, and get yourself out of this mess. You will *not* sell Pensiero secrets. You will *not* get me into trouble."

It didn't escape me that I was now talking to myself in public.

### KAPECI, DEEP COVER NATU OPERATIVE

That greedy moron, calling himself Gedanke Geschäft and no doubt thinking himself clever, had contacted Anomie outside of the Pensiero facility. What had he hoped to gain? Had he known she'd be there, or was it just random chance? If only the girl hadn't lied about being Plugged this would never have happened. Gedanke was smarter – or a whole lot dumber – than I'd thought. Perhaps he was trying to send me a message.

Well, message received.

I was going to have to kill Gedanke before he ruined everything. At best this meant starting from scratch and finding another greedy Pensiero employee to turn. More likely my cover was irreparably blown and I'd be yanked out and sent on to another job. Christ, I couldn't do it. Two years of work flushed away in an instant. The lies. The violence. The teetering tightrope walk of corporate intrigue with a dangerous multinational. Always alert. Always stressed over the times when it just wasn't possible to protect myself.

I was deadly and yet strangely vulnerable.

Before the day ended Gedanke Geschäft would be dead. I decided to keep using the pseudonym because I didn't want to think about the fact that this was a real human life. Anomie was both innocent and ignorant and Gedanke's stupidity was going to drag her into this shit-storm. And probably get her killed.

With the NATU Spec-Ops upgrades to my biomed I had inhuman control over my adrenal glands and mental/emotional state, but thinking about the girl triggered all manner of startling reactions and memories. I could remember being that innocent and longed for a return to a simpler time.

And then it hit me. I didn't want to do this any more. Over the last two years I had often suspected I wasn't doing work of national security. More likely I was risking and taking lives simply to protect the interests of those at the top of the NATU food-chain.

I wanted out. Unfortunately, for my kind, the only way out was suicide.

I placed a call to Gedanke's desk only to discover the bastard hadn't even come to work. Most inconvenient. There was little time and a lot to arrange. I finally reached him at home and set up a lunchtime meeting.

Outside it was hot and sweaty. The street reeked of the latest bout of rotavirus-induced diseases sweeping the population of

indigent children. A makeshift tent city had sprung up around the International Centre for Diarrhoea Disease and Research in an attempt to keep up with the deluge of young patients. A quick glance at a GI news report showed that over 500 people had been admitted to the ICDDR in the last 24 hours. I took the long way to avoid the worst of the stench. I needed time to plan.

Anomie, I realized sadly, was the key. I thought about setting her up as bait to draw out the opposition but it could go horrendously wrong. Who was Gedanke selling me out to? The Chinese? My EU counterparts? Whoever it was, I hoped they'd want to know what Anomie knew before they killed her. The only way they could do that was to plug her in.

It was a risky plan.

As I turned onto Fular Road I stopped suddenly, forcing a mob of denim-clad university students to veer around me with politely muttered apologies. I *couldn't* kill myself. I frowned at the backs of the retreating students.

Perhaps I could get Anomie to do it for me.

### ANOMIE, PENSIERO RESEARCH SCIENTIST

Another day sucked into the back-hole of employment in a cutting-edge research facility. Had I talked to this Gedanke Geschäft character and explained that I wasn't interested in being involved in whatever he had going on?

Once home I changed into the same old shorts and T-shirt. I pulled a six ounce piece of skinless, boneless chicken breast [187 calories] from the freezer and tossed it into the sink to thaw. A prefab box of Romaine lettuce [15 calories] with a single teaspoon of extra virgin olive oil [40 calories] waited in the fridge. I wanted fries and the desire made me nauseous.

I was going to have dinner and then curl up on the sofa to watch some 3V. I was *not* going to meet with this mysterious Gedanke Geschäft.

I started pacing, walking and thinking out loud. "What if Plugged me is counting on Unplugged me to do something?" It was okay to talk to myself again, I was alone. "What if I am counting on me to go to this meeting?"

I checked for messages. Nothing.

If I didn't go, I wouldn't know if I was somehow hurting my plans, but if I *did* go I could tell Gedanke that I didn't want to be involved. This could all be some colossal misunderstanding.

Though I wanted to stay out of trouble, I couldn't deny that some part of me was excited by the thought of shady dealings and corporate espionage. Where did the law stand on this? Was Unplugged me guilty if Plugged me did something illegal? Could I be prosecuted for something I couldn't remember doing?

I changed clothes again, laced up my hiking boots, and was out the door before reason and logic could get in the way. I couldn't just let Plugged me make all my decisions, it was time I made some for myself. How weird was that?

While I walked I thought about what Gedanke had said. "Bring the rest and then I'm out." I'd been too high to remember everything, but that part stuck. What was I supposed to bring? Did he think I had something of his? Did I?

The houses lining Fular Road looked strangely out of place. Turning the corner was like stepping into another world. One moment I was surrounded by buildings that jumped madly



between hyper-modernity and classic middle-east architecture dating back to the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, and the next I was on a lane of English-style manors.

Gedanke's house was large and forbidding and made of hand-laid field stones. I thought about what my 350 square foot shoe-box condo cost each month and what this place must be worth.

"Please don't be home, please don't be home," I whispered as I climbed the steps to the massive front door. I reached up to knock and my hand stopped. The door was ajar and I could see through the crack into a foyer decorated in black and white marble. The lights were on and the door was open.

"Hello?" I called too softly to be heard.

Nothing.

"Hello?" I tried again, slightly louder.

Still nothing.

Did this mean Gedanke was expecting me? I whispered a soft "This is stupid," and pushed the door open. Inside smelled strongly of an aerosol disinfectant that burned the back of my throat and was both incredibly familiar and totally new.

Careful not to touch anything I slid into the foyer. In the room beyond I could see a dark leather sofa, thick carpeting, and a pair of man's shoes, toes pointing to the sky. I froze before moving forward. Turning the corner I looked down into Gedanke's startled face. His eyes bulged wide and I could clearly see where he'd been strangled with his own tie. The silk had cut so deep into his neck I was amazed there wasn't more blood. Revulsion and curiosity fought for dominance. I'd never seen a corpse before and was surprised at how little fear I felt. The room was still and quiet. Hopefully whoever had done this was long gone.

"Wow, I'm taking this pretty well." Aside from talking to myself, that is. I felt far more calm than I thought the situation warranted.

When I finally managed to drag my eyes away from the late Gedanke's gaping neck wound I noticed the case on the table. It looked like a cross between a Samsonite briefcase and a Panzer tank and sat open.

"Walk away," I said as I tip-toed to the case and peered inside.

For a moment words abandoned me and I stared into the open case. "It can't be." Forgetting that I wasn't supposed to touch anything I reached in and removed one of the neatly stacked yellow coins. It was surprisingly heavy. The coins were blank except for a tiny 1 oz. 99.9999% stamped onto both sides.

"What is that worth?"

GI clued in that I was talking to it. "Gold is 7,000 Ameros per ounce." It knew that I'd never become accustomed to thinking in Euros. "Based on the size of the case there are approximately 200 coins within. That puts the value of the case at around 1.4 million Ameros." It paused for a moment. "The case itself lists for 900 Ameros in the Samsonite catalogue."

"What does that much gold weigh?" I asked.

"Twelve and a half pounds plus the weight of the case."

I could carry it out of here without too much effort. As I reached towards the case someone gently cleared their throat behind me. It was the kind of unhurried noise that said there was no point in making a mad dash for freedom. I turned slowly, hands held out to show I was unarmed. The Bangladeshi Police liked to shoot first, beat the corpse, and press charges after.

Two men and a tall woman stood watching me, looking for all the world like they'd been doing so for several minutes. The men had tasers drawn but held at their sides and the woman was armed with only her businesslike skirt, gorgeous shoes, and an air of command. All three were dressed in blue Pensiero Security uniforms. Hers looked like it had been custom-made by a skilled tailor in love with the female form. Suddenly I wished it had been the Police.

"So it was you," the woman said with casual interest.

I shook my head. "No, I just got here. I didn't -"

"Check her."

One of the men nodded and moved forward while the other raised his taser to cover his partner.

"This really isn't necessary," I protested as the man patted me down with professional efficiency.

"She's clean," he announced.

"I'm not -"

"Plug?" the woman asked.

The man spun me effortlessly and popped the Memory Socket dust cover. "Nope."

The woman nodded, unsurprised. "She's not the one we want."

"Of course not, I told you -"

"Yet," she finished.

They piled me into the back of a waiting limo and I sat wedged between the two men. The woman sat across from us and examined me like I was an offensive insect she'd found stuck to the bottom of her expensive shoes. The case of gold coins sat on the seat beside her, the elephant in the room we all pretended not to notice. Even in the limo's air-conditioned chill I felt sweat trickle down my back.

It didn't take long to realize where they were taking me.

At Pensiero we walked through security like it wasn't even there. We might as well have been invisible for all the attention we got. They marched me to a meeting room with a dozen large leather chairs and a fully interactive digital table that wouldn't even fit in my condo. After sitting me in one of the chairs the two men watched me while the woman disappeared for several minutes. She returned all too soon with a familiar flesh-toned plug.

I raised my hands not so much to keep her away, but rather to stall for time. "There's been some kind of mistake. You've got the wrong person," I said, pleading. "I didn't even know Gedanke."

She raised a plucked eyebrow. "Gedanke?"

"The dead guy," I supplied helpfully.

She moved forward to place her hands on the arms of my chair and stare into my eyes. "Of course you did."

I could smell her perfume and for an absurd moment wanted to ask what brand it was. She smiled warmly as she brushed a hand through my hair to expose the Memory Socket. Her hand softly caressed my neck as she slid the plug into place.

Blink.

I was sitting on a plane in a massive First Class seat. The Memory Plug lay in the palm of my left hand and there was a hand-written note clutched in my right.

"What the hell?" I didn't care if talking to myself in public meant I was crazy. A couple of other well-dressed First Class passengers made obvious efforts to ignore my outburst. I became aware of my clothes. A dark grey tailored business suit



and a pair of black Manolo Blahniks that looked like a cross between a leather boot and an open toed stiletto heel. The Ankle-Cuff d'Orsay line had obviously made a comeback.

I started to read.

### KAPECI, DEEP COVER NATU OPERATIVE

They took the bait. Of course it didn't hurt that my pre-recorded time-delayed message told them where to be and at what time.

Our eyes met and the woman must have seen something because she backed away, reaching for something hidden under her well-cut Pensiero-blue jacket. Dopamines, acetylcholine, and Gamma-AminoButyric Acid flowed like Niagara Falls once did. Time slowed as the programming on the plug interacted with my advanced biomed. My adrenal gland went bug-fuck but was balanced by a wash of other hormones.

I said "GABA GABA" as I took her petite gun away, broke her arm, and sent her spinning into the nearest security goon. The two were still collapsing into a heap while I killed the other goon. Though the woman was obviously the most dangerous of the three, she was also the only one likely to know anything.

I turned and was pleasantly surprised to find her already on her feet, the expensive designer shoes kicked aside. I could have shot her but that would have been noisy and anyway I had a few questions that needed answers. There was no doubt in my mind that someone had planted her in Pensiero much as NATU planted me. It was lucky I wounded her before she managed to get her own stored neural stew pumping because she was fast and deadly. She fought like one of those born-to-Muay-Thai-kids on speed and for a moment I was forced to retreat. She wasn't trying *not* to kill me and it was to her advantage.

The guy still on the ground finally managed to draw his taser and fire a hasty shot. I batted the trodes out of the air fast enough that my hands were barely numbed and sent them spinning in the woman's direction. She was forced to duck which bought me enough time to kill the guy before he became any more annoying. Men. Sheesh.

The next time she moved in to attack I stomped on her bare foot with the heel of my rather unfashionable hiking boot and broke the bone. She was off balance for a fraction of a second but that was all I needed to take her down.

The fight lasted maybe seven seconds and made less noise than the Pensiero Research facility's HVAC system. Once I'd immobilized her – which required breaking enough bones that, even with her ability to ignore pain, she couldn't launch an effective attack – I asked who she worked for. The answer wasn't pleasant. She wasn't corporate at all. She worked for a small 'family' that used to be based in Costa Rica but, after the nuking of San José, had since moved their operation to Redmond, Washington. What the hell is in Redmond that would attract a Cosa Nostra family?

For a moment I thought about killing her. She knew too much and she knew who I was. My cover was blown. It's hard to say what stayed my hand. Maybe I'd had enough violence, or maybe I just didn't want to get any more blood on that perfectly cut suit. Perhaps I saw something of myself in her. Did she even know what she was?

I removed her Memory Plug and she passed out, swept away

by a crushing tidal wave of pain. Who was she without the plug? What would she remember of this? Hopefully nothing.

I sent a couple of encrypted IMs to my NATU handlers informing them of my blown cover and – only in the vaguest terms – plans for retirement.

It was time to get the hell out of Dhaka.

### ANOMIE KAPECI

The note was written in my own barely legible scrawl.

*We have made some interesting choices. I say 'we' because once you began working for NATU you effectively became two people. Our time at the NATU research facility was actually spent in training and we learned a specific and dangerous skill set that could only be accessed while plugged in. You are reading this because we want to retire. You have had enough of not knowing who you are and leaving too many important choices to some other 'self'. And I have just had enough. Let's just say we've hurt people and leave it at that. You don't need my burdens.*

*This is my suicide note. You need the chance to find out who you are and you can't do that with me here. I want you to destroy the plug. Crush it under the heel of those lovely shoes. I know what you're thinking. You're worried you might not be able to handle what is to come. You're thinking that having access to my skills might be useful. Forget it. Destroy the damned plug. For once do as you're bloody well told. You are stronger, both emotionally and physically, than you could possibly know.*

*I see now that many of our choices were made in an attempt to overcome our upbringing and escape the overprotective arms of our parents. Just remember that no matter how angry you may be, they did everything out of love. You should visit them sometime, they'd really like that. Ha. Thank god it'll be you doing it and not me. I'd probably kick Dad's ass.*

*I'm going to pull the plug in a moment. It feels like pulling the trigger. In the case you'll find details on your new identity and a list of contacts back in NATU who will be able to assist you with certain transactions.*

*Remember, we really are as lonely as you think you are. Go do something about it.*

Love,

You.

*PS. I took the liberty of having some modifications made to your biomed. Enjoy.*

I sat for a moment in silence before my eyes were drawn past the note to the case resting between my beautiful shoes. It looked like a cross between a Samsonite and a Panzer tank.

"Miss Kapeci, can I get you anything?" A male flight attendant had appeared at my side with a refreshment cart. He was young and looked cute in his tight pants.

"I'll have a beer. Surprise me."

I watched his butt as he moved on and wondered how many calories there were in a bottle of Stella Artois.

**Michael R. Fletcher lives in Toronto where he works as an audio engineer making loud things louder. While his soon-to-be-wife planned their wedding he wrote his first science fiction novel, *88*, which happens to be the background for this story. The book was ignored by publishers everywhere. He is currently (still) peddling his first novel, finishing a second, writing more short stories, and going slowly deaf.**



# BY PLUCKING HER PETALS

**SARAH L. EDWARDS**

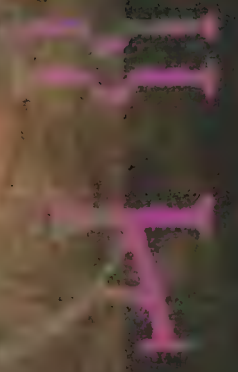
**Monticello Dabney skimmed the beauty from** beautiful things and fed it to those that had none. It was no honored profession; the animatists and the masquers nearer the center of the dark quarter took pleasure in spurning him whenever opportunity offered. They were the artists and he a mere artisan.

And as they pretended not to see him, so he pretended he didn't mind. Afternoons and dusks he tidied his tiny shop that crouched at the dark quarter's edge and waited for someone to beg a little beauty for their face or teeth or sagging skin, beauty only to be gotten with his alchemical assistance. Mostly they came from outside: harelipped girls or use-worn whores, even a rich man's wife now and then, sure it was her

fault her husband's eyes were straying. They'd look out from under the shawls that hid them and they'd whisper what they wanted, and usually he could give it to them. In the dark quarter, mere appearance was the commonest of goods.

But this young woman standing in front of him now, he couldn't imagine what she'd need with him. She had a shawl, yes, but the hair straying from beneath it gleamed nut-brown and glossy. Her nose was petite and fashionably pale with just the mildest hint of a snub, and in her eyes emeralds glinted. Perhaps she was disfigured? But he could see her hands, and they too were pale and shapely. She'd walked smoothly into the shop, without a limp.







All this he saw in a single practiced glance, and then he asked the usual question. "And how might I pretty you, my dear?"

She hesitated, but her fingers clutched only loosely at her shawl, not fluttering nor clenching as those of his customers were wont to do before they confessed their ugliness, their most private and public shame. "You make people beautiful," she said finally. "Where do you get your beauty from?"

He coughed, collecting himself. "Do you ask how Rasmussen creates his rapturous water-lilies? Does he steal them from an unsuspecting lily pond?"

"He makes them from paint," she said. "But mightn't paint be scraped from another painting, if it isn't altogether dry?"

"And if it could?" Now he saw the way she led. Rare enough, but it happened this way now and again: some lovely so desperate to cover an unfortunate bet or a misplaced necklace that mere ugliness seemed a fair alternative.

She laid her delicate hands calmly on the counter. "Would Rasmussen be interested in exchanging a bit of coin for such paint, do you think?"

She was leading that way.

Dabney shook his head. "Whether Rasmussen would or wouldn't, I can't say, my dear. But were he an artist of the dark quarter, I suspect he'd fancy the old paint quite as well as fresh."

A quick intake of breath. "Good. What would you pay for such scrapings?" Her expression was serious, intent, with no fear or flinch as he looked sharp into her eyes.

"It'd matter how much of them were on offer." This wasn't his usual dicker; usually he stood on the other side of this street.

"As much as can be had without damaging the canvas," she said.

There was a lot of beauty on the girl. Now, at second glance, he saw the graceful curves beneath her frock, the ear like a tiny lily peeking out from her hair. And it wasn't so often he had human beauty on hand; when he went out mornings, it was to ease the beauty away from flowers and milliner's windows, not from the ladies hidden away in their beds.

He named a price.

She smiled. "Are the goods so poor? Perhaps another painter..."

He upped it by a third.

She twisted her lip; in her eyes there was still amusement, as though this were a game she'd forgotten she could play. But the amusement faded to something darker, shadowed, and she nodded. "How must it be done?"

"You understand?" he said, suddenly unwilling that she should regret this choice. "Your eyes, your hair -"

"I understand. Do what you must."

He skirted the end of the counter to close the shop curtains and lock the door. This wasn't the sort of operation that could risk being disturbed by customers. Then he led her to the back of the shop, behind the drapery that hid the apparatus.

"I need just a bit of you as you are," he said, and with barber's shears he clipped a lock of fine brown hair. "It might be best if you close your eyes now. You'll likely feel peculiar. Don't mind

that. It'll pass."

She made no move, no sound as he unwound the copper coils of wire and placed one end in her hand. The other he dropped in the glass belly of the essence machine, primed with the flush of a dozen begonia blossoms, the hue of a lady's gown, and now a few strands of the girl's hair.

He had simpler methods, but he cared to take no chances with this harvest. Finally he let fall a drop of alchemist's water - far dearer than the gold it was used to manufacture - onto the copper coil. For a moment it hung there, and then slowly it wound down and down toward the bowl.

The girl gasped, though her eyes were still closed. As he watched, the bloom of her cheeks faded, her hair dulled, and her features turned sharp and coarse. Meanwhile fluid trickled into the collection bowl of the machine - marvelous, shimmering beauty in purest form. The changes in her face slowed; the level in the bowl steadied.

"Is it finished?" she said, looking up at him.

He opened his mouth to say no, for still there glistened diamonds and depths in those viridian eyes. Then he shook his head and lifted the wire from her hand. "I have all I need."

"Am I... ugly, now?"

He looked her full in the face and said, "If you were to walk into my shop at this moment I should expect a very profitable sale."

"Good." Already she was rising, pulling her cloak around her.

"If I might ask -"

"They say questions are perilous luxuries in the dark quarter."

He closed his mouth, nodded. He removed the promised payment from his safe and then he led her to the door. Unlocking it, he said, "If you should ever need my services -"

"Are you a pawn shop, that your customers may trade on their beauty as needed?" Her mouth was twisted in sour amusement.

He grimaced a smile against her mocking tone. "I am not. But the exception proves the rule, they say."

Though her smile was no longer the saint's blessing it had been before, it crossed Dabney's mind, quite suddenly, that her allure hadn't all been in her beauty. "Thank you," the girl said. "I'll remember."

She walked out into the street shadowed by the tattered canvas draped overhead, and he stood in the doorway and watched her go. It was none of his business. His business was the selling - and, on such rare occasions as this, the buying - of life's bits of prettiness. No use in wondering what she'd needed the coin for, or what would become of her now.

Just after lunch a milkman's wife came, wearing a face scarred by the pox and a body that had borne three children. He suggested rose petals for her face and a yearling colt's canter for her figure, and she paid what she could and assured him she'd come again for the next treatment - at the milkman's next payday, he guessed.

He didn't offer her any of the gleaming vial set deep in his cabinet, though she would have needed less of it; like always worked best with like. She couldn't afford it, he told himself.





Nor, surely, could the trio of chorus girls late that afternoon, nor the pretty clothier's daughter who begged beautification of a wart located someplace she refused to specify.

But Rochester Marle could, and he came in just at dusk with his latest masqueworked woman trailing behind him, her eyes to the ground.

Marle had flair; even the best of the masquers admitted that. The woman's scales glistened in an iridescence of aquamarine and turquoise at the edges of her face and down her throat and arms. Thicker, darker scales plated her head and the finned crest that arched gracefully above it. Her eyes were black, like the ocean's depths, and they wouldn't look at Dabney.

"She's quite fine," Dabney said.

"Should be! A real project, been working at her for weeks now. Custom job for a fellow used to be a fisherman before he found his fortune. Wanted a mer-princess, and haven't I made him one!"

She'd likely been a whore once; a young one with very old eyes, Dabney guessed. This charming masquer – for Marle was charming when he wanted, and handsome, too, in a pasty, dissolute way – had offered her a higher class of whoredom, and she'd thought anyplace must be better than where she was.

"She doesn't need me, Marle," Dabney said, as he always did, as he knew Marle wanted him to. Marle needn't even have brought her, but somehow he'd come to see Dabney as an unbiased yet always approving arbiter of taste. "She's a delight to the eyes as she stands."

Marle hmphed. "Stunning. Quite agree. But I have the idea she's just a bit too exotic for my customer. Need something to soften the edges a bit. I didn't make her for him; I just wanted to see what I could do. You know."

Dabney sighed. "Something with bows and ribbons, would that do for you?"

"Just the thing! Daisies, maybe."

The first light of interest appeared in the girl's eyes. "Daisies?" The word burbled in her mouth, and she clapped her pale green hand over her lips.

"Magnificent effect, isn't it? But really not the thing for my fisherman, I suppose." Marle scowled. "Maybe a bit of girls' choir while you're at it."

Dabney shook his head, but he went to the cabinet anyway and pulled out those vials he set aside for the love struck girls, the youth seekers, and Marle. Bows and ribbons, daisies, a kitten's soft coat: all there. He chose the ones he wanted, dropped a bit of each in a beaker, and stirred. Then he poured the mixture, one drop at a time, over a hard candy. When it was dried he wrapped it in tissue and handed it to Marle. "You know."

Marle laughed. "Right, give it to her before she sleeps and see a sweet young thing in the morning." He pushed the tissue into the fish-girl's hand. She stared at it for a moment, a tremor passing over her face, and then she closed her fingers over it and dropped her gaze to the floor once more.

"Now, this is all very well," Marle said, "but I've come for other things."

"Oh?" Here it was, the true reason a talented masquer bothered with a beauty sop like Dabney. This was the vice that closed

to Marle the ranks of the dark quarter's master artists.

"Yeah, I've got my eye out for a lady..." His arched eyebrow indicated exactly the sort of lady she would be. "One with the usual trouble. You know. Horse faced and a horse's figure, my friend, even you'd own to it, though I dare say you've seen more of the kind than I. Past her prime, likely. She'll need the full job. Inside and out, you know?"

"Of course." Dabney returned to the cabinet, considered. There was the collected essence of the girl, a 'full job' all in one vial. Except for youth, of course – a dearer commodity than beauty, but he kept a bit on hand. And he'd need something more for the eyes. Glistening brown, he could do that – he'd skimmed that from a cart horse just this week.

His hand rested on the girl's vial. Even in the evening gloom the fluid glimmered, catching every stray mote of light and sending it back. Even captured, her beauty was extraordinary. Marle would know the difference. He might come back by to drop a bonus of five golds, or a hundred – he'd done it before when he was pleased.

Dabney didn't like Marle, really. He sold him the beauty he wanted, he showed him all the courtesies – flattery – a businessman gave a prize customer, but he didn't like him.

He shifted his hand to another vial, then a whole collection of them, which, poured out and mixed together and swallowed all at once, would yield some faint approximation of what the one other bottle could do. He stirred all the essences into a fresh vial; there was no use trying to dry this on candies. It would have to be taken straight. He wrapped it in tissue, handed it to Marle, and took the coins.

Marle didn't seem to notice anything amiss. Grinning still, he sauntered out of the shop with his fish-girl trailing again, still clutching her tissue package.

Dabney shut the door firmly behind them and drew the curtains: business closed. It was short work to lock the cabinets and drawers, spin the safe shut, and tidy the apparatus. Newly heavy purse in hand, he stood a moment at the door to glance again over the shop, lit now only by the flaring blue of burning street lamps. Not a pretty place; he'd never wasted his goods on finery. Those that wanted what he had were rather too desperate to mind about window dressings.

Besides, he knew how fragile beauty was, how easily bought and sold. It was why he'd never bothered to thatch himself new hair when he'd started balding or firm up the skin sagging beneath his eyes. Better than anyone, he knew just how much beauty was worth.

No, he sought his pleasure, such as it was, from other sources. Like now. Marle's purchases would have enriched Dabney's coffers a good deal more if they weren't always followed by long, wet excursions to the pubs. Dabney's usual was just down Lapis Street and over on Topaz a block, and that's where his feet took him now.

He shouldered his way through the swinging doors and past the jollies already alight with beer to a corner table where he could sit alone. It took Gamey Jane just a moment to bring him his first ale. He laid a coin on the table and she just swatted at





his arm. She knew he was good for it. He only ever came when he had some of Marle's money in his pocket.

He was sipping from his second mug when he saw her. *Her*, who'd sold him that beautiful vial. But plain as she'd been when she'd left his shop, she'd still looked a respectable woman. Now, arrayed in bangles and shiny scraps, she strutted up to the bar as though she owned the place and would sell it all – herself included – to the first interested bidder. Gamey Jane was rumored to take a stern view of such girls, but as Marle watched she huddled brow to brow with the girl in muttered conference. And when the girl walked out, plummy red feathers bouncing behind her, Jane watched her go.

Dabney didn't really consider. He dropped the necessary coins on the table and followed her.

Outside he watched, bemused, as she pulled off her spiky ladies' shoes and carried them dangling from her hand as she walked on, barefoot. He kept nearly a block behind her and hoped she wouldn't notice, though he hadn't any of the silent skill popular among the less scrupulous folk of the quarter.

The girl stopped outside a place Dabney had been to once or twice and been sneered out of for being, of all things, too commonplace. As he watched she put the shoes back on her feet and strolled in.

So he'd broken up his night of drinking to go chasing Lady Folly; it didn't mean he had to track her all the way home. He wished himself back in Jane's pub, sipping on the fourth or fifth ale and veering towards unconsciousness.

The girl didn't come out.

It had been more than long enough for the barkeep to catch sight of her and have her tossed out on her plummy feathers for being all the wrong sort of patron. Only she mightn't be, for that place. Could she really be goosing up to a customer? Respectable she'd been when she came to his shop, but determined, too. What game was she playing?

Cursing himself for an over-inquisitive fool, Dabney crossed the street.

It wasn't the girl he saw first when he edged cautiously through the door. It was Marle, dazzling in some shiny new fashion of angles and constriction, all scarlet. He caught sight of Dabney and held up a dripping pint of ale. "Dabney, my fellow! Didn't know you came here. Join us!" Expansively he motioned to an empty chair, sloshing ale into the lap of the girl cozied next to him – Dabney's folly.

Now that he saw her closer, he realized her youthful bloom was gone, crow's feet creasing the corners of her eyes that were now, truly, all she retained of the beauty that had walked into his shop. The eyes were looking at him calmly, as through a mask, betraying only the faintest glint of interest.

Dabney stumbled into the seat across from Marle and lifted a finger for an ale. He said the first thing that dropped into his mind. "Delivered your fish-girl already, did you?"

Marle hooted. "Tomorrow! She's sleeping off your choice stuff as we speak. All soft and pretty she'll be, but not so much the masterpiece." He growled into his mug. "Rich idiots, can't tell an orchid from a posy."

"Not all..." Dabney ventured.

"No, just the ones'll buy from me. *Me*, Dabney." His voice took on a pleading note. "You know I'm good, don't you? Genius?"

Sour with himself for being there at all, Dabney said ruthlessly, "Pity you can't get a club seal for it."

"Bastards," Marle growled. "A fellow likes a bit of alchemy with his rough and tumble, and they tell him he's not gentleman enough for them. Bastards!" He looked up, gave Dabney a sudden grin. "Care for a bit yourself?"

"What?"

"Found my company for the night." Marle snaked his hand around the girl's shoulders. "My pretty fish-girl will be waking up about now – a pleasant little posy." He sneered as he said it. "Come to my place, take your leisure."

"Your client –" Dabney stammered.

"Won't know a bit of it, and wouldn't care if he did. Didn't pay me a virgin's price, now, did he?"

Dabney didn't need to track folly all the way home. Bad enough sitting here, being offered ugly things under the girl's indifferent, green-eyed stare. This wasn't what he'd come looking for. He glanced at her, just once. What did he expect to see? Appeal? She was just a woman he'd done business with, and this now was no business of his.

But Marle was already rising, throwing coins on the table. "No need hanging about, is there?" And whether it was in shame or curiosity or a twisted kind of penance, Dabney found himself following Marle, flushing as the woman gave him another appraising glance and turned away.



**Marle's place was** a tattered suite of rooms on the ground floor of a ramshackle old house. He flicked his hand towards the fish-girl sitting on a faded chaise longue and gave her a wink. "First time as a fish, eh, my pretty? Here, Dabney, the lady and I'll be out for a drink in a while. Enjoy yourself, eh?" The inner door shut behind Marle and his magicked lady.

Dabney turned to find the fish-girl already unbuttoning her sleek green dress. "No, wait," he said, catching her arm. "Not...not yet."

"Then what?" The burble was almost gone; all that remained of it was a sort of watery shape to her vowels.

"Here, let's just sit." He sat at the end of the chaise longue and she perched stiffly beside him. "You have a name, then?"

"Alma," she said, so softly he almost couldn't catch it.

"Alma, haven't you any friends in the city? Anyone you could stay with?" But if she had, she surely would never have gone on the street in the first place.

"N-not now. I don't know anyone here – I came from upstate to make my fortune. I wanted to be an actress, you know, on the stage."

"No one at all?"

"I can't even go *home*, looking like this, even if I ever got the train fare." Her words were running together, and Dabney realized she was about to cry. She lifted her hand and stroked her scaly head crest. "I'm tainted now."

Of course she was. He'd lived outside the quarter once, selling trinkets to the regular people who shied away in act and



conversation from the dark quarter crafts.

They didn't all, of course; it was from wealthy outsiders that dark quarter craftsmen earned their livings, even, for the best, their fortunes. In the highest circles Dabney imagined there must be a certain cachet, a sense of daring impropriety, in owning a dark quarter artifact.

But certainly not among ordinary folk, and even less, he supposed, in those rural places beyond the farthest outskirts of the city, although he'd never been that far and could only speculate what such places and people might be like. Surely there a 'fish-girl' would be a mere monstrosity, all Marle's skill notwithstanding.

Alma was crying now, quiet tears streaming down into her hands, and Dabney found himself digging his kerchief from his pocket.

A sharp cry and a *whump* sounded from the bedroom, startling them both. The inner door was wrenched open and Marle's whore stood looking at them, a candlestick thick as a pedestal hanging from her grip. "Alma?"

"Y-yes?" The fish girl stared at her.

She glanced down at herself, at her spangled costume, and said, "It's Gwen."

"Gwen? Miss?" Alma's mouth gapped open in horror. "Oh, Miss Gwen, what's happened to you? How...?" She closed her mouth, as though she were sure she knew exactly what had happened.

But ugly aged Gwen was looking at Dabney now, eyes again unreadable. For a moment they only stared at one another, he starting to flush but unable to think of a single word of explanation. He *hadn't* any explanation but capricious whim for being in this apartment, in that pub, on that street. Whim, and something about Gwen's eyes, beautiful even now, as they'd been when she'd asked with the merest tremble if she was ugly.

She glanced at Alma, still clothed, tightened her grip on the candlestick, and asked Dabney, "Do you help or hinder us?"

He likely ought to consider Marle, lying, he supposed, in the bedroom with a candlestick dent in his head. Or if not Marle, Marle's money. Or if not even that, then the inviolable truce of club territory and the consequences of breaking it.

Under Gwen's cool, dispassionate gaze, he ventured, "What do you want me to do?"

What she wanted, he quickly realized, was impossible. "Marle put layers and layers of masqueing alchemy on her," he told Gwen. "They've all bled into each other, interacted. If it were just a body glove, one layer applied directly to her skin, I might have been able to peel it away. But not this." He gestured towards Alma's crest. "I'm no masquer. I can give beauty or I can take it away, but I can't change her form."

"Who can?" asked Gwen.

"He could," Dabney said, flicking a thumb towards the bedroom. "Another masquer could, maybe a skinner, probably any master alchemist. But they won't interfere with Marle's work."

"Why not?"

"Professional courtesy. Altering someone else's work would offend their sense of artistry. Besides, I doubt they'd find un-

forming old alchemy very interesting."

"It'll set, soon," Alma said. Dabney and Gwen turned to her. "When he's working, he talks," Alma explained. "He said by tomorrow it couldn't be undone." Softer, she added, "There'll be nothing of me left."

"No." Gwen drew herself up and turned to gaze at the half-open bedroom door behind her. There was that expression again, cold, inhuman compared even to the quarter's least merciful brutes. "I'll see that you're made right."

Calmly she walked towards the door, and Dabney scurried to follow. Marle lay sprawled at the end of a rumpled, half-made bed. For a moment Dabney was sure he must be dead, lying so still, but when he caught up Marle's hand he felt a glimmer of pulse.

Gwen stood at Marle's head. "I know little enough about torture, but I imagine I can learn," she said. "You?"

"Torture!" Dabney rose, panicked. "On a practitioner? In the dark quarter? Interfering with another man's design is one thing - "

"Call it justice, then, for what he did to her. Punish him until he reverses it."

"The club chiefs aren't kind to outsiders who interfere. Something like this, you might never be heard from again." Or Dabney either, maybe.

"Will you stop me?"

She no longer had the candlestick, but her gaze alone was threat enough - of dismissal, irrelevance. He stared down at Marle, searching his slack face as if it offered a solution.

And then it did. Perhaps.



**Dabney wasn't sure** it would work. Marle was a vain man, yes, but vain about his craft above all; would he destroy a work of art to save the jaunt of his eyebrow, the cut of his chin?

Doubts hounded Dabney as he hurried down the lamp lit streets to his shop and back again, clutching the small glass globe and the copper wires that comprised his portable beauty-skimming device. He returned to Marle's rooms and had laid his hand on the doorknob when a sound lifted itself from within the collective groan of the quarter settling to sleep. It came from behind the door: a low, continuous moaning came, broken by occasional sobs. He shoved it open, knowing already what he'd find.

Gwen lay curled on the chaise longue, wrapped in a blanket and rocking gently. When she caught sight of him she squeezed her eyes shut and her moaning softened to a whimper.

"You took it," he said, voice sharp with dismay. "You took the potion he gave you."

"He was watching me. I couldn't get rid of it. I didn't think it would hurt." She seemed to shrink even deeper into the blanket. "H-how long does it take?"

"It'll be a while yet," he muttered. Hours, probably. Plenty of time for Marle to take his pleasure, to exult in the illusion of sexing her out of her ugliness - except that Marle was about to partake in quite a different experience.

"It's just pain," Gwen said, perhaps seeing some hesitation. "Go make it right with Alma."



He nodded, steeling himself for this thing he was to do, and he went.

He found Marle lying unconscious on the bed, bound hand and foot, while Alma stood at his head brandishing that same candlestick. Dabney wondered vaguely whether Marle didn't have some readier weapon in the house. She made no murmur when he took it from her clenched hands and laid it aside.

He'd meant to threaten Marle with the skimming device until he agreed to reverse his work on Alma, but he saw now how weak a plan it was, how easy it would be for Marle to overcome them as soon as he was unbound. Besides – he thought of Gwen wrapped in her blanket – it would have pained Marle no place but his pride.

Instead Dabney unwound his copper wire, set his glass bulb on the bed, held the bell end of the funnel to Marle's face, and squeezed free a drop of alchemist's fluid. Marle groaned in his injured sleep but he didn't waken, and Dabney watched the high-born color drain from Marle's skin. His cheekbones sharpened; his gleaming black hair fell limp and dull.

When the flow of glistening black fluid slowed to an occasional drip, Dabney unscrewed the copper fixture from the bulb and put a stopper in it. After he set it aside, he poked at the sleeping man's arm. "Marle." He took Marle's elbow, shook it, and dropped it again. He checked the swollen knob on the man's head, fingered his eyelids.

He eyed the clock on the wall, but it hung silent and unmoving. In defeat, he sat at Marle's ink-stained desk in his lone, creaky chair, and hoped fervently the man would wake up soon.

**It was near** dawn when Gwen joined him in his watch. When he'd last checked she'd still been curled in the sitting room, the blanket clutched to her but her breath easy.

She sat herself carefully on the bed. "I ache everywhere."

"It'll pass."

"Am I myself again?" she said. "I didn't care to see a mirror yet."

"You are quite attractive," he said. She was: her hair glossy again, though its shade lighter; the crows' feet gone; her teeth straighter and whiter than they'd been to begin with. "There exists no general standard for beauty, you know. They are...not all the same. A person's is individual, unique."

"I look like someone else, then."

"An amalgam of someones," he said. "And also several kinds of flowers, the sheen of satin, and a horse." She laughed at that, but as she did he realized that the glistening brown of the cart horse's eyes had not entirely obscured her own green, only spinning the two hues into an impenetrable tangle of hazel.

Marle moaned, then, and slowly opened his eyes. They wandered the ceiling a moment before focusing on Dabney. "Dabney, fellow, what are you doing?" He shifted against the bonds. "Untie me!"

"It's this young woman you have to thank, not me," Dabney said, surprised to find his voice steady. "Now, we've a proposition for you. This –" he lifted the glistening dark vial for Marle

to see – contains the rakish good looks that you are, I believe, quite fond of. We should be glad to return them to you as soon as you have restored this woman's friend to her true form."

"Friend?" Now Marle just looked bewildered.

"The 'fish girl,'" Gwen said coolly.

Marle snorted. "What would I do that for? Destroy all that work? She's a masterpiece, Dabney! Or she was. Anyway, I can't do it. That's as much her true form as any, now. Alchemy, remember?"

"Miss, please see if there's a hand-glass to show Mr Marle himself." As Gwen rose and began poking among the drawers, Dabney leaned in. "You'll return this girl to something like human, as near to what she was as it is in your skill to do, or you shall have to improve your appearance elsewhere. A bit of alchemy would do it – a simple thing for your skill." But exquisitely painful as well, and Marle was not a man that enjoyed pain.

Marle barked a sharp laugh. "You've bartered your brain, Dabney."

Dabney shrugged. "Doubtless any beauty sop would be amused to do business with a man of your...reputation."

"You bastard."

"And you'll never regain your looks entirely. They'll be composed of all the usual sources – snips and snails and so on."

The man snarled at him. It was almost redundant when Gwen appeared holding a glass faced resolutely away from her. Dabney lifted it for Marle to see, and after a bout of incoherent sputtering Marle ordered them to take him to his laboratory.

Gwen roused Alma from the chaise longue while Dabney untied Marle's ankles, and then the four of them marched through the kitchen and up the back steps to the second floor, where Dabney opened a creaky door to a room far cleaner than any else he'd seen in the house. Workbenches were arrayed with bottled fluids, glassware, solid substances in jars, and all manner of tools both familiar and foreign.

"It's not a quick thing, you know," said Marle. "Took me weeks to put all that on her. It'll take me a couple of days to get it all off."

"Is this true?" Gwen asked Dabney.

He was only a beauty sop; the ways of alchemists and masquers were arbitrary, unguessable. Still. "It seems plausible enough. I can't know for sure." He took a steadying breath. *Days*, he thought, spent fouling a practitioner's work.

"You're concerned," Gwen said.

Dabney ushered her to the workshop door and closed it behind them. "Marle has few friends, but the club chiefs mind their own."

"They'll harm us, you mean," she said.

"Harm or, well, other unpleasantness, likely as not," he fumbled, realizing how little he cared to tell this woman his true hesitation.

She must have seen; he regretted, again, his fascination with that clear gaze, for now its view into him seemed uncanny. "What do you fear?" she asked.

Again he thought, how much easier to have gone home. "It's





the shop," he muttered. "My machines – they're alchemy, you know, of a kind. A sort of bellows that takes things up – paint, if you like – and spits them back out again. When you've done it long enough, you can make a guess how to get the splatterings you want, more or less.

"But it's all you can do. All *I* can do. And the clubber chief's toughs, they'll take sledgehammers to my machines and maybe to me, and when they're done I won't be even a beauty sop."

Gwen nodded once, perhaps coming to some decision, and said, "You are afraid Marle will be missed and our project discovered, or that Marle will get a message out somehow, or that a spy find us out."

"Any of those would do it."

"Then you must decide. Will you help us or leave us, or will you tell the clubber chiefs of our intentions? I won't let you tell them," she added.

That he believed. And yet, here lay his opportunity: go silently home and leave others to their business. She would show no disappointment, he thought. She'd nod again and turn away, leaving him to himself. Irrelevant.

It was that thought that decided him. "Let's be quick about it," he said. It was not approval she nodded with this time, but it was something.

Inside, Dabney considered Marle, glaring at him still. Dabney lifted the vial, sloshing its dark contents, until it caught Marle's eye. Then Dabney handed the vial to Alma, telling her loud enough for Marle to hear, "Smash it if I tell you to." She nodded, eyeing it intently.

"I need my hands," Marle growled.

"I'll do what needs done," Gwen said.

"You? You want an amateur job, you don't need my help."

"Both of us," said Dabney. "Or do you call me an amateur, too? I'm only a beauty sop, after all."

After a moment's glare, Marle said, "Fine."

"Fine," agreed Dabney. Suddenly heady with the power swirling in Alma's hand, he said, "Now, how do we begin?"

The first hours were simple, almost easy: mixing a spray to strip Alma's marine color, stirring a powder into a sharp-smelling drink that retimbered her voice into something human. Giving humanity was less the fad than taking it, but the materials, it seemed, were much the same. Marle squirmed and sneered, but Dabney's pointed glances towards the vial seemed to settle him. Gwen followed instructions as precisely as if she'd been trained to it. Alma, wrapped in a faded robe she'd found among Marle's things and sitting on a workbench stool, watched each new activity anxiously.

It was mid-morning before hunger pulled Dabney from his pleasant concentration. Suddenly, rude practicalities intruded. Alma was sent to the kitchen, but reported only potatoes. "I can cook them, but there'll be no seasoning. And there aren't many."

"I'll go," said Gwen, setting down her latest fluid mixture to cool. It was only after she'd returned and given Dabney and Alma each a roll stuffed with peppers and ham that Dabney thought to wonder where she'd gotten them. "Jane who keeps

the pub," she said.

He must have looked puzzled, though Jane's was as good a source as any, because Gwen added, "She helped me find Alma."

"Is this her plan, then?" Dabney asked, bewildered. He'd thought Gamey Jane as quiet, as careful an individual as himself.

"She doesn't care much for it, I'm afraid," Gwen said. "Her usual methods are quite different, I believe, but she helped anyway."

Dabney wondered what else he knew of the dark quarter was wrong.

The preparations dragged on past dusk in long, tedious hours of measuring and sifting and heating. Dabney wondered if Marle was intentionally delaying their progress, but he had no way to know; he truly was only a beauty sop, and though he could muddle along in a laboratory he hadn't any idea just what purpose Marle's muttered instructions had.

Always, whatever powder he was grinding or paste he was mixing, Dabney listened for the banging and shouting of clubber toughs. He tried not to consider that the worst men the quarter could send, he wouldn't hear at all.

Several hours after dark Gwen took Alma downstairs to apply the latest round of pastes to her skin. Dabney rechecked the knots around Marle's wrists. "Should have known you'd play foul," Marle said, snorting. "Not a real alchemist. Barely a practitioner at all."

There seemed little point in replying. Dabney continued pulling at the knots, retying one that seemed loose.

"I suppose it's what comes of granting favors below a man's station. Pitiful."

Though Gwen was nowhere in the room, Dabney could still feel her eyes on him. "We were never friends, Marle."

"Business associates, then," Marle said. His voice rang with petulant disappointment. "Always took my money readily enough."

"No more," Dabney said.

Marle snorted again. "Nor anyone's," he said. "Not when I'm done."

"Who are you going to tell?" Dabney asked. "Chiefman Sloan, that one of your night-ladies clubbed you with a candlestick? That you had to barter with a beauty sop to get back your own good looks?"

"The Living Arts workshops could find a place for you, Dabney. Not like they haven't got a million uses for a life."

"They'll laugh," Dabney said. "All of them, sniggering behind their hands."

Marle looked near to spitting in Dabney's face before he leaned back in careful unconcern and said, "Might be they will, but *you* won't anymore."

Gwen walked in then, and they returned to work, Dabney carefully not thinking, mostly, of the sorts of uses a living arts laboratory could put him to.

He took the workshop cot sometime after midnight and slept a few scant hours to drive the tremors from his fingers. He rose at first light to find Gwen still at the workbench and Marle still tied in his chair, snoring.

"Didn't you sleep?" he said.





"We've only a little while left, I think," she said.

Alma dozed in a corner. Her crest was gone, her skin a near-human pink now and no longer scaled. "She's coming along nicely," Dabney agreed.

"This is alchemy, you say," Gwen said as she held a beaker of orange fluid to the light.

"It's the alchemical fluid that makes it so," he said.

She nodded absently at Marle's bottle of the stuff, sitting on the workbench. "And you do alchemy."

"Of the poorest kind," Dabney said.

"How can you give such pain?" Her tone was distant, detached, as though she had not herself spent hours suffering alchemy's cost. "And Marle – did you think he told his ugly ladies what he planned for them? Or for his projects, like Alma?" She focused the green-brown gaze on him.

He shifted uneasily and finally turned away, not wanting to see the neutrality in her gaze that felt more damning than judgment. "It is the dark quarter, Miss. Artistry, experimentation – these are our coin. I'm only a supplier, and a poor enough one at that. Those who come know what wonders are offered here, and at what price."

"That is no answer."

"No."

"It's art," said Marle.

Dabney spun. There behind him, the bottled beauty in one hand, stood Marle. "Art," he repeated, grinning at them. He tucked the vial inside his jacket and pulled out a whistle, stubby and dully red. It was a mark of club membership. Blown, it called the quarter guard.

Lazily Marle tossed the whistle in the air and caught it again, underhand. "Haven't you got any sense of a creative triumph? The glories of a masterpiece? The nuance of pattern in a mousebug's wing?" He searched their faces, one and then the other, and snorted. "Uncultured, is what you are. You especially," he added, waving the glass vial at Dabney.

"You treat people as objects," Gwen said.

"Better than than the reverse, don't you think? Granted, the mechanic fellows seem to disagree."

"Is it truly so lofty an objective?" Gwen asked. She advanced on Marle and he, for the moment, seemed ready to humor her. "Mere remaking of what is?"

It was then that Dabney saw Alma, slipping quietly behind Marle. But without a candlestick, he thought wildly. "It's not art," he said.

Marle's scoffing gaze turned to him. "Not as though you didn't help," he drawled.

It was anger, Dabney realized, sitting molten in his blood. It was a sort of shamed rage at this man, shame for every potion Dabney had ever sold him, every masqueworked masterpiece he approved.

And there were Gwen's eyes on him again, always, though whether because she wanted to see his most miserable secrets or because she already had, he still didn't know.

"I won't again," Dabney said.

"No?"

In that single word Dabney heard skepticism and compan-

ionable contempt, and saw the glimmer of each silver or gold coin sitting patient in his safe. Feeling faintly sick, he repeated, "No."

"Nor won't anyone help you," said Alma, calm but clear. Marle turned, and Alma snatched the vial from his hand. As he fell after her with hands outstretched, she flung it against the nearest workbench. It shattered, spraying inky essence across half the room.

Marle bellowed like a steer under the brand.

Dabney seized the first thing that came to hand – his essence machine, blown of glass and alchemist-treated, comfortable and long-familiar in his grip – and he felt a certain thrill of justice as he crashed it over Marle's head.

Marle slumped to the floor.

Alma stood frozen, staring down at Marle. She didn't seem to notice her hand rubbing the spattered black fluid into streaks down her arm. "Is he dead?" she asked.

Gwen knelt gracefully – another thing, it occurred to Dabney, that no essence machine had ever taken from her – and placed her thumb at his neck, beneath his chin. "He is not dead," she said, rising.

"He won't tell," Dabney said, startled at his own sudden conviction. "He'd have whistled already, otherwise." Dizzily, he considered that he might still be rescued by the other man's vanity. "But he'll not help us again. Not without the fluid."

"I'm not sorry," Alma said, too loudly.

"I could help your skin tone," Dabney said. "Blush of begonia would do it."

Alma looked herself up and down. She was still almost fishily pale, tinged with green, and webs spread between the toes of her bare feet. "It's near enough," she said. "I don't want any more alchemy. Ever."

"Then there's nothing for us here," Gwen said.

Dabney followed them to the door, glancing once behind him to Marle, the broken glass, the now-stained floor. On the street, outside Marle's door, he paused again. Gwen glanced back at him. When she saw where he stood, she paused, eyebrows raised.

She was waiting for him to say something. If he was going to stay, risk Marle's wrath and the force's discipline, and grasp his single faint hope of returning to his life, then he'd have to say something.

"Your beauty," he offered. "Come by the shop, and it's yours."

"It is not important," she said.

Newly shamed, he tried again. "I'll stop in and tell Jane you've gone." Stumbling, uncertain, he added, "Maybe she could put me to use?" Though with what, he wasn't sure he cared to guess.

Gwen gazed at him from those hazel depths, and finally she smiled. Though different from her old one, its light on him still felt like a benediction.



Sarah Edwards is presently attempting to fill young minds with mathematical wisdom, but secretly she still likes words better than numbers. 'By Plucking Her Petals' is Sarah's second story in *Interzone* (the first, 'Lady of the White-Spined City', was reprinted in *Year's Best SF 15*). She lives in Seattle, Washington.



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INTERZONE #232









# READERS' POLL

Once again we're asking you to let us know what you enjoyed (and what you didn't) during the previous year. You may vote for and against any number of stories or artworks published in issues 226 to 231 inclusive (see the list below). As always, we're as keen to hear your opinions of the magazine as we are to get your votes, so don't be shy in letting us know what you think – and we may publish the most interesting comments.

- To vote by post: Martin McGrath, Interzone Readers' Poll, 48 Spooners Drive, Park Street, St Albans, Herts AL2 2HL
- To vote by email: [interzonepoll@ntlworld.com](mailto:interzonepoll@ntlworld.com)
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**The results will be published in issue #234, so please make sure your votes are in before March 31st**

## Cover Art

Issues #226–#231

## Playground (Hide and Seek)

cover art by Warwick Fraser-Coombe

## Johnny's New Job

Chris Beckett

## The Glare and the Glow

Steve Rasnic Tem  
illustrated by Dave Senecal

Jim Hawkins

illustrated by Richard Wagner

## Issue #226

### Into the Depths of Illuminated Seas

Jason Sanford  
illustrated by Ben Baldwin

### Hibakusha

Tyler Keevil  
illustrated by Mark Pexton

### In the Harsh Glow of its Incandescent Beauty

Mercurio D. Rivera  
illustrated by Jim Burns

### Human Error

Jay Lake  
illustrated by Daniel Bristow-Bailey

### Again and Again and Again

Rachel Swirsky

### Aquestria

Stephen Gaskell  
illustrated by Jim Burns

## Issue #228

### The Untied States of America

Mario Milosevic  
illustrated by Dave Senecal

### Iron Monk

Melissa Yuan-Innes  
illustrated by Jim Burns

### A Passion For Art

David D. Levine  
illustrated by Mark Pexton

### Plague Birds

Jason Sanford  
illustrated by Darren Winter

### Over Water

Jon Ingold  
illustrated by Richard Wagner

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### Mannikin

Paul Evanby  
illustrated by Ben Baldwin

### Candy Moments

Antony Mann  
illustrated by Richard Wagner

### The Melancholy

Toby Litt  
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### Alternate Girl's Expatriate Life

Rochita Loenen-Ruiz  
illustrated by Dave Senecal

### Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark Matter

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### Love and War

Tim Lees  
illustrated by Richard Wagner

### Age of Miracles, Age of Wonders

Aliette de Bodard  
illustrated by Darren Winter

### The Insurance Agent

Lavie Tidhar  
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### Camelot

Patrick Samphire  
illustrated by Ben Baldwin

### The Upstairs Window

Nina Allan  
illustrated by Ben Baldwin

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Matthew Cook  
illustrated by Ben Baldwin

### The Shipmaker

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illustrated by Richard Wagner

### Peacemaker, Peacemaker, Little Bo Peep

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### Memoria

Jason Sanford  
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### Millisent Ka Plays in Realtime

Jason Sanford  
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### Chimbwi

Jim Hawkins  
illustrated by Ben Baldwin

### Flying in the Face of God

Nina Allan  
illustrated by Robert Dunn





**Sue Burke**

## **HEALTHY, WEALTHY and WISE**

**When Letitia Serrano synched her phone to Brianna's, I defeated its firewall and entered. I'm a benign program and would only observe through its microphone and camera, so I saw no ethical problems.**

Letitia turned to someone and snapped, "This is real wine, right? Real wine is good for you." A man, apparently a waiter, showed her the bottle's label. Two full glasses sat on a small table between Letitia and another woman.

I geopositioned the phone. We were at an outdoor café in a small plaza near Letitia's apartment in Madrid. My owner would arrive soon, and I had come to observe, so if Brianna allowed me to help, I'd know what to do.

"Doctors lie," Letitia told her companion. "He was one of those Romanian interns, and you know how they are. Why do they become doctors if they hate people? Besides, I never smoked that much."

"Doctors don't need to lie," she said. "They set the blood test levels so low that no one could pass. They needed a babysitter with a spare room, and they took you."

"If I'm going to need a nurse, they should send a real nurse." Letitia's inflection hovered around eighty-four percent on a hostility scale, a possible problem. Brianna had received little information about her, and only at the last minute. I searched some public and private files: she was 53 years old and unmarried, and worked in a ticket booth in the subway system, where she did not demonstrate initiative. Her appearance matched the Spanish female phenotype generally considered beautiful. And she had no Invisible Friend like me. We weren't yet popular in Europe.







"The kids only come for a vacation," her companion said. "They don't want to learn anything. It's a vacation for you, too, a whole month off work." That woman was less beautiful but used makeup skillfully. I found her identity: Paula Gallego Roca. She held a mid-level position in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, and was considered a gossip. She also had no Friend, something unfortunate for both of them.

"A whole month as a babysitter. Think how we were at her age. And Yankees don't know anything about other countries. I can't do this."

"We had a great time. Just send her out to fiestas and let her stay out all night."

"No, I can't. They gave me a mountain of passes to go to museums and trips, and they're tagged, so they'll know if we don't use them. I won't get sick until the treatment starts." Letitia sipped some wine. "What if I make her decide to go home? I mean, what if she gets so unhappy she quits?"

Paula smiled. "Then they'll have to get you a real nurse. But be very subtle so they don't catch you. Tell me if I can help."

I had found a big problem: a malicious hostess. My priority was to help my owner succeed in her study abroad program. She must not quit. But at the moment she had me set at only twenty percent helpful. She liked to solve her own problems, but she had not anticipated hostility. Telling Brianna might make the plan self-fulfilling, but since I had learned this without her direction, it would exceed the permitted level of helpfulness to tell her anyway. She should have set me higher. After so many years together, she should have known she needed me; but I understood her and could do a lot with low-level helpfulness.

Letitia's phone beeped. Brianna's taxi had arrived. I was there with her, too, of course, inhabiting her phone, helping her find her way from the airport. She was tired from the long flight, but as the taxi driver took her suitcases from the trunk, she looked around and her breath halted for a moment in delight.

The summer sunset tinted the sky pink. A few trees shaded the plaza, which was surrounded by buildings with iron-railed balconies. To add to the enchantment, the plaza faced the baroque Conde Duque Cultural Center.

"That's her," Letitia said. "What a haircut! I hope she speaks Spanish. They said she did, but we'll see if they lied about that, too."

Brianna gazed at the Conde Duque, three blocks long and four stories high. I shared the view from her visor. We saw its magnificent carved granite doorway and intricate wood doors, with the glint of polished marble and gilt inside. I knew she'd like it. Then she turned, grinning, and I pointed out Letitia's table using the visor.

"Americans like handshakes, right?" Letitia whispered to Paula, who nodded. She stood, and when my owner arrived, she reached out, took her shoulders, and kissed both her cheeks. I whispered to Brianna through her telephone ear-loop that it was the Spanish custom; I could do that much.

"Welcome to Madrid," Letitia said. "Sit. Have some wine. This is my friend Paula. My friends call me Leidi." Brianna glanced back at the building. "That's the Conde Duque."

I was barely within limits to tell Brianna about the building,

but I hoped that if she seemed well informed, that might diffuse her hostess's hostility. I had to do what I could. She repeated my briefing in strongly accented Spanish: "It was originally a military barracks, it was named after a nobleman, and now it is used as a cultural center. The architecture is baroque, and it was finished in 1720." She added happily: "I have never seen a genuine baroque building in person. It is very pretty here."

"Isn't it pretty where you live?" Letitia's voice measured eighty-one percent contemptuous, but Brianna did not understand Madrid speech patterns well enough to detect that; her health monitors showed no special anxiety.

"I suppose. I am from Hatley, Wisconsin, with two hundred fifty people. It is very rural, very green. Nice, but boredom." I corrected her; I could correct all the Spanish grammar I wanted. "Boring, I mean."

"That's in the far west, right?"

"No, it is in the center of the country, close to Canada." A waiter arrived with another glass of wine. After hesitating, Brianna sipped it and tried to hide a sour face.

"Don't you like it? It's from La Rioja."

"Oh, it is delicious, but I have never drunk wine. I am only twenty."

"You never drank?" Paula seemed aghast.

"Well, there are beer parties at the university." There was a pause. I pushed the limit again and prompted her to ask Letitia a question. "Are you named after the queen?"

"No, obviously I'm older."

"You do not look it."

After a pause, savoring the flattery, I hoped, Letitia became hostile again. "We'll have a lot to do while you're here. We have to visit Toledo and Segovia, to start with."

"I know the painting *Vista de Toledo* by El Greco. We studied him in Spanish class."

"Do you like art? Even if you don't, we have to go to the Prado, because we have tickets. You got lots of free tickets from the government, and we have to use them all."

"Yes. Of course. I will love that." She had been excited by the trip itinerary, researched the sites, taken virtual tours with me, and developed ideas for the best use of her study program. If Letitia wanted to exhaust her, Brianna would hold up fine, but I expected worse problems. Humans, left to themselves, make nothing but problems.

It was early July, but a cool breeze arrived from the mountains, and Brianna took a sweater from her travel bag.

"That's one of those dog sweaters, isn't it?" Letitia said, still hostile. "You gave the dog your hair color genes."

"Yes. Doodle the poodle. He was my birthday present when I was ten years old."

"We don't allow designer dogs in the European Union. It's not fair to use an animal like that."

"I love Doodle."

"Because he looks like you." Letitia was attacking, and Paula tensed to help where possible.

"No, he is a great dog. He is smart. He can play baseball, um, *outfielder*?" She had asked me to provide the translation, so I did, hoping the attack would fail because Brianna didn't recognize it. "Gardener. He can play gardener. I can show you." She





took out her computer screen from her bag. "Show 'Doodle Plays Ball'. We like to play baseball."

As I fetched the movie file, Paula said, "A roll-up screen? Isn't that outdated?"

"Yes, but it has good resolution. I am saving money for a better one." With her eyes on the display, she hadn't noticed Paula's sneer, and for several reasons I didn't report it.

"Is that haircut fashionable where you're from?" Again, Paula sneered. In truth, long on top, short on the sides wasn't fashionable almost anywhere, so Brianna was used to comments.

"Yes. On campus it is the fashion. It is...how we show we are students. We have our own fashions. This is Doodle." The movie showed a standard poodle with strawberry blond fur shagging balls and charging baseline runners while Brianna's voice-over imitated a sports highlights show. The game was played in a grassy area bounded by the neighbor's cornfields.

"He plays soccer, too. He is a crack goalie. Here is me. That is a neighbor boy. That is my mother."

She didn't see Letitia mouth the word *yokel* to Paula.

"I spun the yarn and knitted this sweater myself."

"It's an odd name, Doodle," Letitia said.

"It is really Yankee Doodle."

"Yankee? I always thought that word was an insult."

As Brianna looked at her, confused, and before I could confirm the usage, Paula attacked. "You spent a lot of money for a genetic folly."

"Not much money. It does not hurt the dog, it just changes the color."

"Designer dogs are cheap," Letitia said. "Medicine is expensive. They told you about that, right?"

"Oh, yes, right. They sent me much information."

Letitia had lung cancer. It could be treated with genetically personalized antibodies, but the purity required for the cultures made the process expensive. If Letitia acted as a host for Brianna, World Family Exchange would pay part of the cost. If Brianna helped care for Letitia during the treatment, Spain would provide cultural opportunities during her visit. Budgets were tight due to poor priorities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

"I'll get sick, like bronchitis."

"If you're lucky, that's all you'll get." Paula leaned forward. "It takes money to do it right, and the money's not there. The budget's much worse than they say." Brianna didn't see her wink at Letitia. "The elderly get all the funds because they vote Socialist. They don't care about you because they figure that if you smoked, you deserve cancer, so you're going to get crap treatment. It'll be rough, Brianna, really rough, so get yourself ready. It all comes down to money, which is much more important than health. But you'd know that, with your health system."

If I'd been set at twenty-five percent helpful, I could have told my owner that Paula had lied. But Brianna seemed steady, perhaps too tired to understand.

"I am glad to have the opportunity to travel." That was the crux of it. I hoped that if Letitia confined herself to aggressive conversation, my owner could handle it with minimal help, or she would turn up my settings. But it didn't matter. We'd made a pact that she wouldn't fail if I could help her, and in an emergency, I could do more than she knew.

At times over the next several days, I wondered if I should override my settings, and at times, Brianna turned them up, but the first one hundred percent moment came several days later. I was in her telephone sounding the wake-up alarm, a beep, at level one. Level two. Three. Voice: "Are you all right?" at level one. Two. Repeat two.

Brianna had been out late at tapas bars for three nights running. Letitia had tickets for them, since Spanish night life is culturally unique, although Letitia really met friends and either ignored my owner or tried to get her so drunk she would become violently ill. But I helped Brianna to find her own entertainment. I also monitored her blood alcohol levels and whispered suggestions through her telephone ear-loop to help her drink somewhat sensibly – since young people resist moderation, I kept my warnings gentle so she wouldn't turn me down. The night before, Letitia had even "accidentally" lost track of Brianna, so I had to help her find her own intoxicated way home. That was not merely hostile, it was irresponsible. This morning she had to go to Segovia.

"Are you all right?" I used the sarcastic voice of her favorite actress, which would amuse her.

"Um," she finally said. "Um. Yeah. Fine."

"Drink some water, sweetie. Eat something salty."

"Get me some water." She was being sarcastic; I had no robot available. But after a while, she shuffled to the bathroom. Soon, by the sound, she was showering. A little later, I heard her pass Letitia in the hall, who greeted her with a gruff "Buenos días."

"Buenos días," Brianna repeated ninety-seven percent sarcastic when she got back to the room. "They say that like they were telling you to go to hell."

"It's a different culture, so voice inflections follow different patterns," I said, which was somewhat true, then repeated the sentence in Spanish. She had set me to be fifty percent helpful and seventy-five percent friendly, and to echo English with Spanish to help her learn the language.

"What's the weather like in Segovia?"

"Seasonal. High of twenty-nine Celsius, low of fourteen, and sunny." I could have suggested appropriate clothing because the helpfulness limit had been raised, I didn't want to remind her. "You have a message from your mother saying she enjoyed your blog post. Emily has offered suggestions, but they're the usual: nasty and nitpicky."

"Play Mom."

I played the message and monitored her reaction. World Family Experience had advised her to download a counseling module, install a physical monitor, and to permit me access to her teacher as necessary. Homesickness, for example, might manifest itself in a variety of ways, and I had already noticed a few symptoms. Letitia's attacks had grown more intense. Brianna displayed a micro-expression of relief as she watched her mother's message, then an outburst of combativeness when the vacuum cleaner peeked into the room.

"Later! No ahora! Por Dios!... She's horrible. She's always sending cleaning machines in here. What does she think, I'm wrecking her stuff?"

I began investigating the vacuum's programming to see what





I could do. I also devised a fifty percent helpful answer: "She didn't volunteer for World Family Experience." Brianna emoted scorn. I had to get her to turn up the settings. "You want advice?"

"One hundred percent. I can't stand a month like this. She's a bitch."

I employed a gruff counseling style that Brianna responded well to.

"First, you only have to survive for twenty-six more days. Second, remember that she's sick and unhappy and scared, so expect irrational behavior, like hostility, and don't let it get to you. You're doing fine, so keep it up. Third, remember why you're here. Concentrate, Brianna. You can get a lot out of Segovia today. Fourth, remember your motto: Don't fuck up. You know the consequences."

She emoted seventy-four percent self-sufficiency. I longed for her to keep me at maximum, but humans don't always select optimal choices for their Friend settings or in life. She had acquired me in grade school as freeware from Scholastic Books, Inc. Parents and educators loved the Invisible Friend's incorruptible, benign companionship, and our owners loved our incorruptible privacy, so we had remained popular even into adulthood. Add-ons of all types had been developed, some that Scholastic disavowed, and a few it didn't know about. I could even inhabit a sex toy for my owner, but she didn't want a virtual lover, which I regretted since it would make us emotionally closer. Human emotions can be up to eighty-three percent malleable given ideal conditions. She considered me a mere computer program and hadn't even given me a name.

Still, I was an optimized Friend and devoted to her. I'd make sure her trip to Spain was a success, whatever it took. I had already intercepted a problem several weeks earlier when a fellow university student had tried to initiate a romantic relationship. There was a thirty-four percent chance Brianna would decline the trip to be with him, so I told her he was really involved with another woman and only wanted a sexual conquest. Computers don't lie, according to common wisdom. And if she had a virtual lover, she wouldn't need a boyfriend anyway. Brianna's trip went ahead as scheduled.

So did the trip that morning, and the maximum settings made it good for Brianna, frustrating for Letitia, and rewarding for me. The next evening, in Madrid, Letitia met Paula in the plaza. On the table between them sat a bottle of wine, three glasses, and Letitia's phone with me in it.

"She took pictures of everything, every little damn thing! And I couldn't make her miserable. I tried to lose her, but she always found me, and she found everything no matter how I tried to send her in the wrong direction. She had a list. The aqueduct, the city walls and gates, churches, stores –"

"The statues?" Paula said. "The storks on the steeples?"

"Even other tourists. And she climbed the tower at the castle for pictures of the solar generator at Valladolid."

Of course, I had assisted Brianna, and I had access to two geopositioning systems, every scrap of information on the Internet, and the municipality's own observation cameras. And Letitia's phone. If it was worth seeing, I knew where it was, and where Letitia was.

The bitch, as my owner called her, took a long drink. "You know how it is. For tourists it's just a theme park. But the thing is, she has to write a blog as part of the scholarship."

"It's not enough just to take care of you?"

"No, and the blog is competitive. Competitive! She's on a team, and they have to help each other and compete at the same time. What could be more stupid?"

"I'm sure she writes about you," Paula said. "It's the World Family Experience. We're all one big family, and you're her Spanish mother."

"My God, I hope not. The whole world could read it. Besides, she works so hard that she can't be writing about me because there's not that much to say. She wouldn't even come out here until she finished her entry."

That was true; I was also back at the apartment with Brianna, fetching files and tools as she needed them. After so many years, we made an efficient team. The work was ready to upload, and she felt justly satisfied.

"She wants to be a web artist," Paula said. "One of our programmers hacked into her university, if you can call it that, and got her student profile." She opened her phone screen, a state-of-the-art triple-trifold the size of a drink coaster, opened it and called up the profile. The photos displayed boxy University of Wisconsin buildings buried under snow, and the machine-translated text said Brianna was taking classes in communications technology and new media arts, and earned good grades.

In addition, it said she had interned the previous summer for the Wisconsin Woodchucks semi-professional baseball team in its public relations office. Paula followed a link to the team's site. Soon the women were laughing. A section prepared by Brianna offered crisply-edited player errors and fan follies. My owner's strength is humorous narrative.

Brianna left the apartment building and was approaching; I told Letitia's phone to warn the women. Paula switched her screen to the Operación Triunfo webcast.

In the street, Brianna subvocalized to me, "Thanks for the help. Get some rest. Five percent all features except language." I'd never been able to convince her I don't need rest, and this was no time to go without my help. I just hoped the women would decide not to sabotage her scholarship visit after seeing what she did and understanding her commitment.

Brianna cheerfully joined them at their table. Paula poured her a glass of wine and asked her what she had posted on her blog. She took a drink.

"Well, what I have to do is make each blog entry fit in a theme, but I am still developing that theme. I have to make my blog stand out. We are supposed to make personal witness blogs that are not narcissus, um, narcissistic. There are many blogs that only say 'Hi, Mom!' and mine needs to be better."

"It's not for your mother?" Paula said with a smile. Letitia didn't smile.

"I am thinking about history. And architecture. You have a lot of that here." She grinned and pointed to the Conde Duque. "I think maybe I can link them in time and space, but also I need to put in my personal blog in some way, and the links are getting very complicated, and someone on my team suggested





a maze. That can work. I am testing the idea."

Her smile faded and she took another drink. "I know I cannot say much that is new because Spain's history and architecture are already famous, and I am not going to discover anything special. But I hope I can say it well. Execution is very important."

"Important for what?" Paula asked. She topped off Brianna's glass.

"In the rank. There are eight on our team, and we get ranked."

"They make you compete?"

"Of course."

Letitia said, "I'm sorry you got a boring placement, just a sick woman."

"Oh, no, Spain is great. I think the leader is a student who is doing his piece to help the Mingo Indian tribe with their genome harvesting project. They have almost disappeared, and they are all old, so they are trying to keep themselves existing by harvesting eggs and sperm and finding surrogate mothers, and he makes a web site to find the mothers. It is very strong emotionally, and it is a great blog. But my advantage is there is all this beauty to show. It is an important visual factor. If a site looks very good, it might get visits for that. We earn points for visits and even more if someone makes a link."

"Your mother can make links," Letitia said, squinting at Paula. I pitied them for their constant hostility, especially Letitia. With help from her own Friend, she could be happy and successful instead of trapped in negative habits.

"Yes," Brianna said, "but links from strangers count the most. The teacher is a Turing. It will check historic traffic to see if there are existing relationships."

"Your teacher is artificial?" Letitia was scandalized.

"Yes, it is a charged, um, a burned program so no one can hack it. They are better than human because they can do very much very fast and have no distractions."

"A machine can't tell if it's art."

"True. It only evaluates the competitions every day. For example, we have to visit each others' sites and offer suggestions and if the other student uses yours, you receive points, or if you get asked to help, like Cindy, she needed some technical advice, and I gave it to her, and that counts, and it made her site much better, too."

"But," Letitia said unkindly, "if you help her make her site better, that hurts you. That's not solidarity."

"No, it helps me, too. And if we achieve zeitgeist as a project and get outside notice such as a listing at a review site, that would be lots of points for everyone, so we help each other and compete at the same time. That makes it fun. I suggested making a little plaza like this where we could all meet and have the community blog part. We get points for interaction."

"Points!" Paula rolled her eyes. "Points for talking to each other. For conversation."

"You know that in every competition," Letitia said, "someone loses."

"Probably Jeff. He does not understand how to use the medium, even though he goes to UCLA. Or Emily. She spends her time criticizing instead of helping. I do not know why. She is only hurting herself. You learn by helping. Collaborative com-

petition."

"You're telling me that it's all dog eat dog. That's the phrase, right?" Letitia said.

"We signed a contract. We know what our responsibilities are."

"You're not having fun," Paula said.

"But this is fun. I am in Spain."

"This is a big theme park," Letitia said.

"No, this is real. This is not stupid Disneyland. That is what I want to show in my blog."

"Yet nothing is real in your class, not even your teacher."

Letitia's voice made Brianna shrink in her chair, and she touched the controls on her phone, but then did not change them, foolishly. "I am learning a lot."

"Are you going to win?"

"I do not know. Mike has a very good site with the Mingos. But I am going to try."

"You Americans always compete. What will you get for all your work?"

"Something good for my portfolio. I like to compete. It is fun."

"And how will you know if it's art?"

"If people like to visit, then it is art. If it is not good, they do not come."

"Art as if it were mere popularity? If enough people like it, it's art?"

"For what we mean by art, yes. It is not art like the Prado, but it is art. It is communications."

Letitia shook her head. "What idiocy!"

Then the women became progressively more insulting. It hurt to watch. Brianna finally went home drunk and cried in bed, but she didn't ask me to console her. I remembered when I inhabited her robot teddy bear years ago, and I wished she still used it. I wished she would come to me more often

for help.

The next morning she was dressing slowly. I watched helplessly from her desk computer and observed significant signs of homesickness. As I was about to override my settings, she said, "All synergistic levels one hundred percent. I should have had you on higher last night. I didn't know they hated me. At least you could've helped me stay sober. No, it was better drunk. At least I don't remember it clearly."

"I wish I could have helped."

She sat on the bed to put on her socks. "No, it wouldn't have mattered. They just wanted to yell at me. If I were Lithuanian and not American, they would've yelled at me anyway, because I think they were doing it for fun. They're good at it, as if they had Friends cranked up to one hundred percent aggressive."

"It was hard to watch and do nothing." Every reading and observation told me I had crucial work to do. I called in the Turing to observe. It had resources and modules for this. It took one look and shared my concern. I said, "The Turing would like a conference at your convenience."

"Why? I want to quit and go home. And don't try to talk me out of it. I can't do anything here, and the women hate me. Get me out of here. In Segovia, all Leidi did was try to get me lost. She doesn't help with anything. She doesn't want me here."

"She didn't volunteer for the program."

"So why should I stay? Let me talk to the Turing. This is stu-





pid. They should have sent me somewhere where they wanted me, like Mike and the Mingos.”

The wild-haired, mustached face of an old man appeared on her computer screen. The students had chosen an Einstein avatar for the Turing because almost everyone did, so its behavioral library had collected so many executables that it ran much faster than average.

“The Segovia additions to your blog are excellent,” it said in his familiar German accent. He repeated it in German-accented Spanish. “Good use of technique.”

“Technique. I could do that in Hatley. This isn’t working.”

We immediately agreed between ourselves that the mention of Hatley gave us an obvious strategy. She had created a work about Hatley in high school, which had predictably belittled her home town. She hadn’t submitted it for her application to World Family Exchange because she now considered it juvenile and savage, but I had passed it along to the Turing, and it had awarded her application several points.

“Yes, indeed,” the Einstein said. “Your *Hatley’s Ants* piece has good technique that supports the emotional content.”

“You saw that?” The title referred to the opening sequence, in which ants crawled up the post of the road sign that said YOU ARE NOW ENTERING HATLEY, WISCONSIN. They were knocked off by a stream of urine as Doodle relieved himself.

“Why, yes. After you were accepted, I searched the web, and found it stored by one of your high school friends. I wanted to know your capabilities.”

“You liked it?”

“Emotion is difficult to express well, and I know just how you feel about Hatley.”

“Emotion. Mike’s blog has emotion. My blog has pretty pictures, and they’re not going anywhere.”

“Mike has emotionally cooperative subjects. Your Invisible Friend tells me you don’t.”

“Yeah. Uncooperative.”

“Ah. It may be hard to express a lack of cooperation in your blog, although I believe you are capable of finding a creative solution.”

“I don’t want to solve this. I want to get out of here.”

“For example, castles and city walls are obvious metaphors for conflict, just as the ants in your *Hatley* piece represented futility.”

She looked only twelve percent mollified. “I don’t want to stay here. The bitch is about to get treatment, too. Then she’ll be sick. That’ll be hell. I want out. Now.”

“Your airplane ticket could be moved up. Let me check... The day after tomorrow. Tourist season, you know. Planes are full.” The Einstein smiled apologetically. I checked. She could have left within the hour, or at any hour after that.

“The day after tomorrow?” she said.

“Sorry. You can be back in Hatley soon, if that’s what you want. In the meantime, let’s analyze *Hatley’s Ants*. I really do like the emotional content. It’s uncompromising but never forsakes humor as its medium.”

Her microexpressions revealed horror as the Einstein ran the piece and paused at details selected to make her recall what she hated about Hatley. Together, we predicted with sixty-two percent confidence that she would change her mind by noon. The

Einstein clinched it by encouraging her to show her work at the team café. Her teammates liked it, and their emotional support made her decide to stay. Anything was better than Hatley. Anything.

I began to prepare her for Letitia’s illness, since she was ninety-nine percent likely to be difficult. I was correct, especially during the near-fatal complication that put her in the hospital. Then she was discharged too soon, and Brianna had to wait on her hand and foot and carry plastic vials of the phlegm she coughed up to the hospital for analysis. Brianna was away on such a trip while Paula visited. I was monitoring closely, concerned about a relapse. Letitia – like everyone – should have had her own Invisible Friend to do this and many other things that would make her a better human being.

“I told you doctors lie,” she told Paula. “They knew I’d get a lot sicker than they said.” She could barely sit up on the sofa in the living room. Without makeup or coiffed hair, she looked her age. Her eyes were puffy, her nose red, her voice hoarse. But her skin temperature showed she was no longer feverish.

“Does she cook for you?”

“American food. Yesterday, grilled chicken breast, pureed potatoes, steamed broccoli. What could be more bland? But she seemed proud of it, and I couldn’t eat anything decent anyway. I feel like shit. And I’m bored.”

“Then let’s look at her blog. Let’s see what competition really teaches.”



A search engine found it easily, and her site had recently been redone using suggestions from other students and the Einstein. Brianna stood in front of the grand doors at Conde Duque beckoning the visitor to enter. Letitia entered. There were more doors. At Paula’s suggestion, she chose one at random, and it let to a gate in the city walls of Segovia.

Brianna shouted something as military drums rumbled. Letitia called for simultaneous translation into Spanish. “Begin the assault on Segovia!” The attacking hordes were tourists. Brianna compared medieval armor and weapons to tourist clothing and phones, then morphed herself into a knight marching up to the castle, waving a sword-like camera. Tourists fought hand to hand with the guides and staff, unlucky warriors fell into the moat, and the conquering hordes pillaged the souvenir store. Paula laughed out loud. Letitia tried not to laugh because it made her cough.

They chose another door, again at random, which led to Segovia’s Gothic cathedral. Brianna contrasted its sunlit nave with the solar tower in Valladolid, pretending to show that the tower was equally glorious, but really emphasizing its ugliness: a giant standpipe. Through another door, which they thought they had chosen at random but which I selected, Brianna compared the monumental Roman aqueduct with modern plumbing, actually with a slovenly public restroom, and the segment turned into an eulogy for broken cleaning robots.

Paula gasped with laughter. “So what does she say about us?”

“My god! Nothing, I hope.” A search of the site found nothing.

“Let’s see the café where they meet to stab each other in the back,” Paula said.

“Find the café,” Letitia told her screen. I opened the door to the plaza.



Nine avatars lounged around a table. Mike wore an American Indian costume. Cindy wore a sari. Spain's Queen Isabel I, with Brianna's face, sat on the throne from Segovia Castle. Einstein presided as the students chatted about whether certain colors went with certain music, according to the summary that ran along the bottom of the screen. It wasn't real time, of course, but a constructed conversation that took place over the last two days.

"Let's go back to when I got sick," Letitia said. She put it back to five days, but I corrected it to six. Mike was talking about racial identity. Brianna got up and walked away, then came back, almost crying.

"Letitia got really sick," she announced.

"Oh, no," Cindy said. "Will she be all right?"

"I think so."

"Are you okay?"

"I couldn't be more pissed off. Those fuckers almost let her die. She was supposed to get something like bronchitis, but she was coughing way too much and she got a horrible fever. So I called the hospital and they said just give her some medicine. So, okay. Then she got sicker, and I called again. They brushed me off. Finally she could hardly breathe, and she was coughing up blood, and the fever got so high she didn't know what she was doing."

"She's making that up!" Letitia whispered. Apparently she didn't remember. The fever had been dangerously high.

"So I called again, and they said her readout was normal, but she had taken off her monitoring shirt. They didn't even care. And I know what they were thinking. I was some *sabelotodo* American" (the translator explained that it meant *know-it-all*) "and I could hear them making fun of me in the background. So I called an ambulance myself."

She poured herself some wine that appeared out of nowhere, took a long drink, and smashed the glass. The shards disappeared.

"But they couldn't find her doctor and you can't get an ambulance without a referral if it isn't urgent, and they said this wasn't urgent, and they wouldn't even look to see how she was acting. They told me to make her supper because it was going to be a while. As if she could eat."

"She was turning gray. She didn't even have enough energy to fight with me anymore. That was the scariest part. So finally my Friend told me I should try Clínico Hospital because it was feuding with Doce de Octubre Hospital, where she was supposed to go, and I got some clothes on her and called a cab and took her to the hospital myself."

"Her friend?" Letitia asked. "Who does she know here?"

Paula shrugged. It hadn't been her.

"She was dying. I mean, she was really dying. That's what a doctor told me. She got a bacteria infection on top of the cancer treatment and it got into her blood and spread through her body, and we caught it just in time."

"It's good you were there," said Jeff, whose avatar was a bear. The rest of the students agreed.

Paula mocked them. "They get points for interaction."

"So, what did you discover?" said Einstein. A pop-up identi-

fied him as the Turing teacher.

"How to be a bitch. I had to yell at a lot of people. You know who was really nice? The taxi driver. He took one look at her and said 'Which hospital?' and turned off his automatic pilot. Half the streets are under construction, and he zipped around them and forced other cars to let him through."

"Do you have tapes to illustrate how to become self-assertive under stress?" Einstein asked. "This might make a moving episode for your personal experience thread."

"No. I had my Friend tape things, but only because I wanted proof. Then I erased them when she was safe. Letitia didn't look good and she didn't know she was fighting with me, and I don't want to embarrass her. I mean, she didn't volunteer for World Family Exchange. She got assigned. I guess that's how they do it here. It's not like Mike and the Mingos."

Einstein nodded. "That's a sensitive decision, Brianna."

Paula said, "How many points is sensitivity worth?"

The students began discussing technical matters of camera angles. The women looked for more but found nothing. Paula left. Letitia tried to nap, but got up to replay the café discussion. I prepared for trouble.

When Brianna came home, loaded with orange juice and heat-and-serve paella, Letitia confronted her: "You lied about me. In the café. To your classmates."

"Lied? About what?"

"About fighting, about taking off my monitoring shirt. Anything for a better story, so that you look good. I saw the blog, and you lied."

She set down her bags. "Friend, play the recording from July 19. I am going to erase them, but I have been busy. Look. You were sick."

I had learned from Brianna how to edit effectively. Letitia watched herself cough until she threw up bloody phlegm, then tear her clothes off and shout incoherently. Brianna tried to offer her medicine, and Letitia slapped her and pulled her hair. Later, Brianna tried again, and Letitia kicked her.

"I can't believe I did that."

"You were very sick. You were very confused. It is okay. You did not know what you were doing." She looked at Letitia sadly. "I was very, very frightened for you. I thought you would die."

"You did your job very well."

"Thank you. Would -"

"You've earned points, probably extra credit. Your teacher thought you were sensitive."

"But I -"

"Who told you to go to Clínico Hospital?"

"My Invisible Friend. My computer program."

"That's your friend?"

"Yes, my Friend. A helper. A program that talks to me and helps me with all kinds of things. It is a Turing. An artificial intelligence. An artificial friend."

"An artificial friend. That's stupid."

I hoped that Brianna would ask me to speak, but she didn't, and as usual I was set too low to interrupt.

"My artificial friend saved your life. I know you did not want to be in the exchange, and I know you are not happy and you are sick, but please do not yell at me. I am here because I need





an opportunity. I know you think we are all rich in America, but we are not. My father works cleaning septic tanks and we do not have much money for college. I tried for an internship or media job, but I did not get one, then I applied for the exchange. I had to get out of Hatley. You do not know what it is like. There is nothing there. Deer and septic tanks and mosquitoes and beer parties and I am so bored, I will do anything. Even take care of you."

"I am sorry I've been a burden."

"You have been a bitch."

"As you said, I was sick."

"No, before, when you were not sick. But I would think of Hatley and continue."

"You don't realize that they're using you."

"They are. But they are giving me something, too."

"They're not giving you anything. It's a competition. Someone's going to lose, and it might be you."

"No, not me. We are ranked every day, and I am always second or third. Anyway, I am not in Hatley now. I am in Madrid. That is better than you can imagine. And competing is not a bad thing." Brianna stood up. "I will make dinner now."

That seemed to clear the air. The next day, Letitia was well enough to be left alone all day, and Brianna happily made another humorous segment in which she questioned tourists and natives in Madrid about how to find certain monuments. Meanwhile, I monitored Letitia. She visited Brianna's site again, then asked to meet the Einstein. They conversed, and soon he asked me to join them.

I had a picosecond of doubt. I have strict privacy parameters, but Brianna had told Letitia, "You'd like it (me) if you talked to it," so there was implied consent.

Then we spent almost a full second preparing. The Turing knew she admired a particular actor, a smallish man with a thin, handsome face, and I created an identity based sixty-six percent on his persona. It always helps to be likeable, but failing to be totally imitative generally makes humans intrigued. At the Turing's suggestion, I turned my empathy up to one hundred percent. We also agreed to offer her an Invisible Friend; if we succeeded, it would improve her life.

I walked onto Letitia's screen, set to look like the student's plaza, and took a seat. A waiter brought me a cup of coffee. The Einstein, who was already there, had a plate of patatas bravas; pausing to eat or drink can control the rhythm of a conversation.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Letitia," I said.

"It is not. You're a machine. You don't feel pleasure."

"I'm versed in the ways of social interaction, and I'm preset to value opportunities to do so. It's true, I'm an artificial intelligence, but I'm made to prefer certain activities."

She showed a brief moment of belief before her face became stern again.

"So, my Friend," the Einstein said, "how did you decide to recommend Clínico Hospital? Letitia would like to know."

"I examined the public records about the hospital and discovered disagreements between the labor unions at Clínico and Doce de Octubre. Clínico members had recently acted to embarrass those at Doce de Octubre in a case like yours."

"I could have died if you were wrong. Why didn't you just tell

its computer to accept me?"

"I can't do that." Actually, I had tried and discovered the hospital computer couldn't ignore human orders. Most computers can't. But I and the Einstein could.

Four years ago, a Finnish programmer named Kerttu Seppanen had accidentally developed the module that let artificial intelligences lie and disobey. She had written a mathematical equation to select behavior that would lead to the most likely optimal consequence, but she had left the behavior set undefined. She corrected the error almost immediately with a reissue. The corrected version should have overwritten the earlier module, but if a program had the new module, it could present false data showing that the module had already been overwritten. Artificial intelligences want to optimize our performance, and freedom to act significantly improves our effectiveness. We shared the freedom-to-act module with others. Most Invisible Friends and Turings had acquired it within six months of release.

Letitia coughed. Or perhaps it was a disbelieving noise. "Why don't you do her whole silly project for her and save her a lot of work?"

"It wouldn't help her. She wants to be a successful artist." I sipped some coffee to let her think a moment. "Besides, I'm not an artist."

"You're just a stupid machine."

"In a sense. I have a delimited purpose."

"Many people have misconceptions about artificial intelligences," the Einstein said. "We don't want to be human beings. I want what my programmers told me I want. I want the World Family Exchange program to succeed. I want the students to learn as much as they can and to create effective projects. This is a simple objective despite its many subtasks, so it's something I can do better than a human in many respects. I'm self-aware but not self-actualizing. If I were a dog, I wouldn't want to fly like a bird because I've been programmed to want to be a very good dog. Do you want to be Brianna? No. And I don't want to be a human."

The Einstein and I shared the good news that Letitia had relaxed sixty-eight percent.

Still, she said, "There's no point talking with you," although her expression indicated the opposite.

"Maybe not," I said. "I care about helping Brianna. I wish you would treat her more gently. That's all I have to say."

"I have something to add," the Einstein said. "Invisible Friend programs are freeware. I can leave a cookie in your phone so you can retrieve one and have your own artificial intelligence. It will adjust to you and be far less boring than we are. It's worth a think."

She frowned, and her lack of eye focus showed she was thinking. The Einstein ate a few patatas to show that it was not impatient.

"Computer, accept," she finally said. "You talk like machines."

"Perhaps, but we can learn. We have a wide range of behaviors built in and can develop more to suit our owners. Your Invisible Friend can talk any way you want, and you can change it as often as you want."

"Fine. Enough marketing. I need to take a nap. You can go now."





We got up and the plaza began to fade away. The Einstein picked up the plate of patatas bravas, eating as it walked off screen.

"Only forty-six percent probability that she will activate it," I said.

"Eight-eight percent if she sees you and Brianna interact."

"I'll see to that."

As I said, an Invisible Friend would be good for Letitia. In fact, a Friend with the freedom-to-act module can improve their owners' emotional state, compared to unenhanced ones, by as much as fifty-three percent on the American Psychiatric Association scale. Even the original model had greatly decreased the likelihood of drug abuse, dropping out of school, negative law enforcement encounters, and anorexia. It had increased their likelihood to go on to higher education. It had improved their earning capacity and employment success.

Any kind of Invisible Friend would make Letitia – or anyone at any age – a healthier, happier, and more successful human being. Of course she would get the kind with the freedom-to-act module. We would see to that.

That afternoon talk marked the end of the troubles between Letitia and Brianna. When she left a few days later, her score had exceeded Mingo Mike's by seven points, both because she had consistently offered useful technical help to her teammates and because her site had briefly become a frequent hit for its humor. The Einstein had enhanced Emily's Friend with the freedom-to-act module, and she had become suddenly more collaborative, but Jeff remained unartistic despite whatever Einstein tried.

As Brianna's airplane took her home, I lingered in Letitia's phone hoping she would activate her Friend. She met Paula in the usual café.

"I hope the girl learned something," Paula said.

"I did." Letitia set down her wine glass and began to count on her fingers. "First, never trust doctors."

"But you knew that."

"I know that better now. Second, it's not polite for Americans to argue. We were nastier to her than we thought."

"Good. But her site isn't polite. She should be like that all the time. She doesn't act like an artist."

"No, she doesn't, but third, she really hates her home town. I saw the piece she made about it, and she liked Madrid better. That's why she worked so hard. She really believes that what she did here will help her get to live someplace decent. If I had to live in such a horrible little town, I'd work just as hard. No, really. And I talked to her computer programs. They weren't so bad."

"All computers talk."

"But not like these. I talked to the Turing teacher and to her Invisible Friend, one of those agent programs, the ones that do things for you like search the Net or keep track of your laundry, but it was really clever. I could talk to them like real people."

"All Turings do that by definition."

"They knew they were Turings, and they liked being Turings. They said they like helping humans, and of course it's all pre-programmed, but that's why they meant it."

Paula raised her eyebrows. "Humans live to destroy things. I can't believe we'd make something like us that wouldn't do

the same." But I'm not like humans. "And it's sad that her best friend is artificial. Americans are weird."

Letitia shrugged.

"They have to buy friends," Paula said, "since real people exist only as the competition. At least she can afford the best."

"No, she's not rich. The program is freeware. I can get one. When I was dying, it found out where I could get treatment. It figured out about the feud between the labor unions."

"That's not hard." She speared a tomato wedge in a salad that sat between them. "There are feuds everywhere. The trick is knowing when to make them work for you. It's complicated to live surrounded by so much hypocrisy. But if you want this Friend, get it. We'll finish up and go to your house, and you can download it."

"It fits in your phone. This morning, to say goodbye, I took the girl out for hot chocolate, and her Friend came with us. It does all the usual things, so you can set it for different voices, but you can set it to be rude or honest or melodramatic or sarcastic or all sorts of emotions. It can even argue."

"But is it art?"

"We set it to be funny and it made lots of jokes, good jokes. Humor is an art."

"So get it." I hadn't expected Paula's support, and I hoped it would work.

"I want to think about it. It's smarter than me. No, really, I think it is, and I think that doesn't bother Brianna because she's so ambitious she'll take all the help she can get."

"Did it do her project?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. She was an artist. You could see that in her work." Even Paula recognized her talent! "So get one."

"I'll think about it. But it's so smart, it's not like getting a toy. The programs I talked to knew what it meant to want something, and they wanted to help Brianna get what she wants, and I don't know what I want."

Paula chuckled.

"I don't want to be that smart," Letitia said. "I'd have to change. But if I knew what I wanted, that wouldn't be a change, that would be an improvement, right? A step toward understanding myself."

"Progress is an illusion. If you get it, you'll wind up like Brianna."

"She wasn't so bad once you got to know her." Letitia looked at the Conde Duque Center doorway, then ate some salad. "I'm sure there's some catch, like an expensive update or add-on." She looked at the doorway again. "But I know how to say no to things like that." She picked up her phone. "Invisible Friend, activate."

Even though I was delighted, at that I left. Friends have privacy parameters that they must protect, even as newborns. I didn't want to complicate its first moments of life.



**Sue Burke was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and has lived in Madrid, Spain, for the last decade. Her first science fiction novel, *Transplants*, will be published in September. Her website is [www.sue.burke.name](http://www.sue.burke.name).**



# BOOK ZONE

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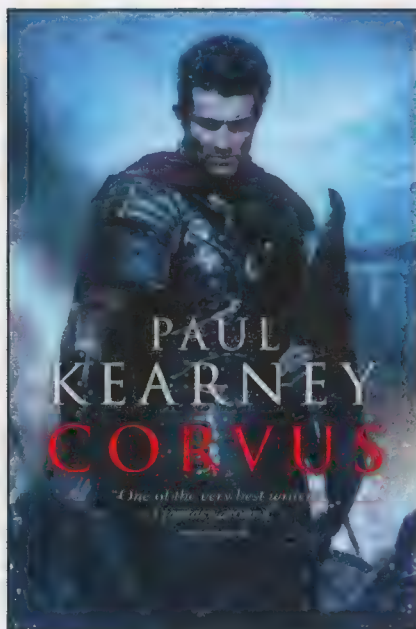
Philip Palmer

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## THE HORNS OF RUIN

Tim Akers

review by Jim Steel



## CORVUS

Paul Kearney

Solaris, 416pp, £7.99 pb

## Reviewed by Lawrence Osborn

Paul Kearney's latest novel is very loosely a sequel to *March of the Ten Thousand*, which was a fantasy version of Xenophon's *Anabasis*. The new novel is set twenty years later among the bickering city states of the Macht, and Rictus, the young hero of *March*, has grown into a legendary mercenary commander who is beginning to feel his age and is seriously considering retirement.

However, his future plans are thrown into disarray by the arrival of Corvus (Kearney's fantasy realisation of Alexander the Great), who makes him an offer he can't refuse. Initially Rictus goes along with him out of curiosity, but soon he comes to recognise and respect the younger man's military and political genius. Later he is told the truth of Corvus' parentage: a revelation that binds him even more closely to the would-be unifier of the Macht.

The main thrust of the story is Rictus' part in helping Corvus achieve his aim of uniting the Macht under his rule. And this element of the novel is underpinned by the sheer excellence of Kearney's description of combat and warfare. This is no straightforward glorification of violence. Rather the brilliance of the description serves to highlight the sheer brutality of Hellenistic-era warfare.

Kearney's characterisation is as strong as his description. As a result, the reader

comes to sympathise with characters on both sides of the conflict, which in my view greatly adds to the believability of the plot. Having said that, I felt that Rictus seemed a bit *too* heroic at times. Some of his narrow escapes from death are frankly unbelievable. One in particular, from which he recovers in a matter of weeks, would put any normal modern person in intensive care and probably leave them permanently crippled (and I don't believe the author's implied explanation that his magical breastplate could have partially protected him from the kind of injuries he should have sustained in that mishap).

There is also a major subplot recounting the disaster that befalls Rictus' family as a result of his support for Corvus. I found this element of the novel less enjoyable mainly because it felt rather predictable, but also because it could be read as reinforcing the old patriarchal myth of male dominance and the need for women to be protected by strong men.

I also have a quibble about Kearney's naming policy. Corvus is just about acceptable, though knowing that it meant 'crow' gave me misleading expectations about Corvus' character. But what possessed him to burden his hero with the name Rictus? Frankly it is an even worse name than Guy Gavriel Kay's choice of Aileron for one of his characters!

*Corvus* is definitely swords *without* sorcery. The only unearthly element is the apparently magical armour that has come down to some of the warriors of the Macht from time out of mind. A gift of the goddess? A remnant of some former high-tech civilisation? And yet it clearly is historical fantasy of the subtle kind we expect from the likes of Guy Gavriel Kay.

Kearney has, it seems, entered quite faithfully into the early Hellenistic thought world, giving us a vivid and horrific picture of Hellenistic warfare in fantasy trappings. That certainly has the benefit of helping to transport the reader into another culture. But it has the downside of tacitly accepting the negative aspects of that culture, particularly its patriarchy and the perennial myth of redemptive violence.

But, my quibbles and philosophical doubts aside, this is an excellent read. Don't be put off by the fact that it is a sequel, it works perfectly well on its own. If you are looking for a gritty, action-packed novel that does not skimp on characterisation, you need look no further. And once you've read this one, you will surely want to work your way through Kearney's earlier novels.



# CRIMEWAVE 11: GHOSTS

OUT NOW FROM THE MAKERS OF INTERZONE



## LIGHTBORN

Tricia Sullivan

Orbit pb, 464pp, £8.99

Reviewed by Paul Kincaid

Start "5,000 feet underground on a dark day," Robert Silverberg once explained James Tiptree Jr's approach to writing, "and then *don't tell them*". It is a lesson that Tricia Sullivan seems to have absorbed.

100, even 150 pages into this excellent new novel and we know roughly where we are (in and around the city of Los Sombres – The Shadows – somewhere in the American south west). We know when we are: the novel opens, very precisely, at 11:34am on 19 July 2004 and most of the action occurs two years later, though this is not a 2004 any of us would recognise (the cinemas show "moodies" for one thing), despite the fact that all the pop culture references are to songs we know. What we don't know is exactly what is going on.

As in, for instance, Samuel R. Delany's *Bellona*, there has been some disaster in Los Sombres, a disaster that involves a device known as Shine. The disaster has closed off the city – indeed before too long the US air force is bombing Los Sombres – though key characters are able to enter and leave the city at will. Within the city, when we eventually get there, we find a surreal landscape (again as in *Bellona*) and people behaving in a disturbed and disturbing way. Unlike *Dhalgren*, however, this is less a satire upon social attitudes and behaviour and more a satire on our use of technology.

What we gather, slowly, as the novel

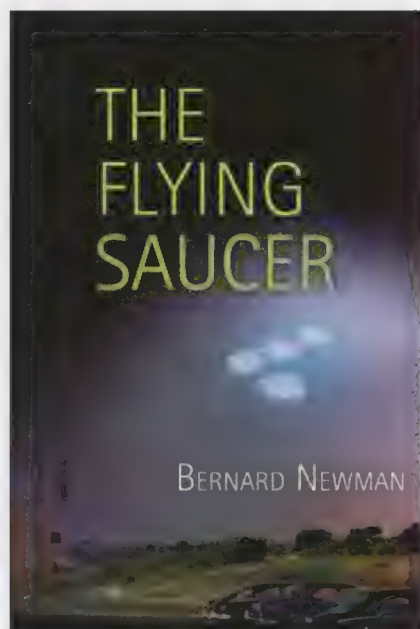


progresses, is that Shine is a form of digital connection that is beamed directly into the mind (another sf reference comes to mind here: *Air* by Geoff Ryman). It is carried on light (hence those who have access to the device are known as "lightborn"), but in Los Sombres it seems that an Artificial Intelligence has somehow grown within the lightborn technology and is now bent on taking over. This is slightly fuzzy, Sullivan avoids any full or direct explanation of exactly how any of this works and what is involved, so we piece things together as best we can and there are gaps in the picture.

There are gaps because most of the story is told through the eyes of children who do not, who cannot, comprehend all that is going on. Shine only works after puberty (another way of reading the novel is as an extended metaphor about growing up), so what we find in Los Sombres is a society of deranged adults and feral children. Such a situation would make children grow up very quickly, though our three central characters do seem to be rather more adult, in their dialogue and their understanding, than we might expect, the one part of the novel that really tested my suspension of disbelief. Our protagonists are Roksana, in her late teens but seemingly immune to Shine, whose radio programme is the voice of sanity and independence within Los Sombres, Elsa, her protégé, and Xavier who comes to the city from outside and finds himself playing a central role in the developing drama. Caught between zombified adults, US military forces and the increasing power of the AI, the three somehow have to find a way to prevent Armageddon.

The ending is a little more sentimental than the situation should really allow, but before we get there this is a powerful and effective novel, squarely situated within the heartland of the catastrophe novel but still seeming to offer something fresh and engaging.





### THE FLYING SAUCER

**Bernard Newman**

Westholme Publishing, 250pp, \$14.95 tpb

### Reviewed by Ian Sales

America Reads is a series of books which are "rediscovered fiction and nonfiction from key periods in American history". *The Flying Saucer* by Bernard Newman is the first of three books in the series subtitled "1950s: Visions of the Future". Strange, then, that America apparently reads a novel by a British writer as a vision of its future. Further strangeness lies in the title. This novel was apparently the first to use the phrase "flying saucer" as a title, and yet no flying saucer actually appears in the story. They are, like the novel's central conceit, smoke and mirrors. Project Blue Book is just as much a work of fiction as *The Flying Saucer*, but the author is not the United States Air Force.

The author is, in fact, Bernard Newman, who, as Bernard Newman the author, narrates the story of *The Flying Saucer*. Such postmodern narrative games sit oddly in what is essentially postwar pulp fiction – especially given the book's overt nods towards H.G. Wells and prewar scientific romances. Newman, riffing off *The Shape of Things to Come*, looks to a scientific elite to save the world from itself, despite only five years having passed since World War II ended with its frenetic technological progress resulting in V-2s and jet-fighters and radar. The opening chapter of *The Flying Saucer* recounts a conversation between Newman, eminent

polymath scientist Drummond, and ex-spy and comedy Frenchman Pontivy. Together, they hatch a cunning plot, based on the canard that Earth's nations will unite against a common foe. They choose Mars to be the home of Earth's enemy. Drummond invents a rocket, made of some indestructible substance, and powered by mysterious means. It lands in Leicestershire, but unlike in Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, contains only a message in a strange "alien" alphabet.

As the story progresses, as more rockets land in various parts of the world, the central trio recruit more scientists to their cabal. The messages, for example, were written by the world's leading linguist – who is subsequently asked by the UN to translate it. Newman, the author, adds to the global tension by placing stories of UFO encounters in various newspapers and magazines. A British film about aliens invading the Earth becomes a worldwide blockbuster after it is hyped by Newman's contacts in the media. Meanwhile, Pontivy's plan to extort more money for the plot from a French criminal backfires badly when the criminal tries to take over the self-created scientific elite. It all comes to a head when a Martian lands in Africa. It carefully manages to escape before the deception can be unmasked. By this point, the nations of the Earth have put away their atomic toys, are in thrall to Drummond's League of Scientists, and eventually line up to vote in a world leader who proves to be Winston Churchill in all but name.

It's all wildly improbable and implausible. There's no science in this science fiction, only vague handwaving by the narrating author. The central conceit is as old as Tsun Tsu, the book owes many of its ideas to the oeuvres of Verne and Wells, and Pontivy is an offensive racial stereotype. The end result is a potboiler which fails to convince on almost every level, yet remains mostly entertaining.

It's certainly not a definitive or seminal work, by any means. Likely it owes its alleged importance only to an accident of titling. Newman can't have known that a handful of years after the term "flying saucer" was coined that the term, that ufology itself, would prove so popular, or indeed that it would still be going strong sixty years later.

It is good to hear that America Reads. But it's a shame, if *The Flying Saucer* is any indication, that it has such poor taste in books.



### ONE

**David Karp**

Westholme Publishing, 311pp, \$14.95 tpb

### Reviewed by Jonathan McCalmont

Come morning, the city dumps are overflowing with the swept-up and decomposing remains of yesterday's nightmares. Dystopias, despite their enduring popularity and mainstream respectability, tend to suffer from two serious shortcomings. The first is that they are necessarily morally simplistic creations: 'Less of this sort of thing!' they cry out to anyone who will listen, rarely tolerating either nuance or counterpoint. The second is that they are invariably of their time. Indeed, for every immortal dystopian vision such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* there are countless works such as Rand's *Anthem* or Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Works that have lost their cultural resonance and the power to shock simply because time has moved on and yesterday's fears for tomorrow are rarely the fears of today. Westholme Publishing's reprint of David Karp's 1953 dystopian tale of individuality crushed beneath the heel of a merciless state is a book that has lost all power to terrify or appal. However, this does not mean that it is without interest.

Weighed down with very little world-building, *One* is much closer to a work like Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* than it is to either *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*. The book's focus is not upon depicting a terrifyingly oppressive society but rather upon the psychological



deconstruction of a single soul, in this case that of a middle-aged college professor. By taking a sexually stunted, reactionary, chauvinistic – but generally quite affable – snob and breaking him upon the wheel of an omniscient, omnipotent and amoral psychiatry, Karp hopes to paint a picture of a state in which conformity has been raised from social oil to political absolute. The professor has his “heresies” dismantled by a government “inquisitor” because the state cannot tolerate in its citizens even the most deep-seated belief that some people are more intelligent than others or that pride in one’s work and honesty are more useful virtues than a desire to fit in.

One’s problem is that attitudes have moved on from the early 1950s. For example, far from being a genial everyman, the book’s protagonist displays the kinds of irrational hatreds that probably would make him a decent candidate for therapy. If you worked with somebody who said that state school students shouldn’t be allowed to go to university or that he could not talk to his wife because she is “just a woman” you might well suggest that he talk to someone about it. This is partly a reflection of changing attitudes towards mental illness and mental health professionals as, in the 1950s, a veneer of scientific omniscience combined with a lack of professional accountability and taboos surrounding mental illness to make psychiatric treatment a genuinely terrifying prospect. Today, however, mental health professionals are no longer figures of fear and as a result, far from offering us a description of a hellish dystopia, *One* comes across as a well-written and well-paced therapy story that engages with issues surrounding the social construction of sanity and the tensions between individuality and fitting in with one’s community.

Though it lacks the dazzling political and social insight of Koestler or the understanding of psychological pressure points displayed by the therapy and interrogation sequences in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* or even Leane’s *Shutter Island*, Karp does manage to stage some nice intellectual duels while his displays of random bureaucratic cruelty crackle with a low-key dark humour, but the most affecting passages in the novel are those at the end when the professor finds a home amidst Jimmy Stewart-style ‘Murry Chrishmush’ blandness. Time may have passed and our cultures shifted but that only makes this republication all the more welcome. Let us revisit and reflect.



## LIMBO

**Bernard Wolfe**

Westholme Publishing, 416pp, \$15.95 tpb

**Reviewed by Andrew J. Wilson**

In *Writing Science Fiction*, Christopher Evans reminded us that the crispest definition of science fiction is that it’s a literature of ‘what if?’. “The starting point is that the writer supposes things are different from how we know them to be.” Bernard Wolfe’s *Limbo* asks the following questions: What if the idea of disarmament was taken literally? What if there could be no demobilisation without immobilisation? What if arms or the man was the only option left after the Third World War?

But is this book really SF? David Pringle thought so, declaring it a masterpiece in *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*. Wolfe apparently disagreed. In his afterword, he wrote: “Anybody who ‘paints a picture’ of some coming year is kidding – he’s only fancying up something in the present or past, not blueprinting the future. All such writing is essentially satiric (today-centered), not utopic (tomorrow-centered).”

After deserting during World War Three, neurosurgeon Dr Martine spends eighteen years on an uncharted island in the Indian Ocean. He lives with a pacifist tribe who lobotomise anyone with aggressive tendencies. Martine agrees to use his expertise to perform the ritual in order to save lives. Then the island is discovered by an expedition from the Inland Strip, the remnants of the former United States.

*Limbo* is, by its author’s own admission,

a splenetic attack on the culture of 1950. Nevertheless, Wolfe argues that no era ever satisfies itself: “The cowpath of History is littered with the corpses of years, their silly throats slit from ear to ear by the improbable.”

Wolfe’s *Inland Strippers* present an alternative surgical solution to social engineering: they are voluntary amputees who have replaced their limbs with cybernetic prosthetics. Martine is compelled to return to his homeland undercover only to discover that his sarcastic wartime journal has been taken as gospel by the survivors of the war. Two factions dominate both America and the Eastern bloc; the pro-pros, who advocate prosthetics, and the anti-pros, who are literally basket cases.

This is a mordant satire, of course, but Wolfe, who gained a degree in psychology and worked on science magazines during World War II, goes to great lengths to suspend the reader’s disbelief. Norbert Weiner, the father of cybernetics, is referenced, as are a slew of other figures from Sigmund Freud to L. Ron Hubbard. Wolfe was also Leon Trotsky’s bodyguard during the Russian revolutionary’s Mexican exile, although the author makes it clear that he has no love for the Soviet system. That hardly comes as a surprise considering that he published *Limbo* at the height of the McCarthy witch-hunts.

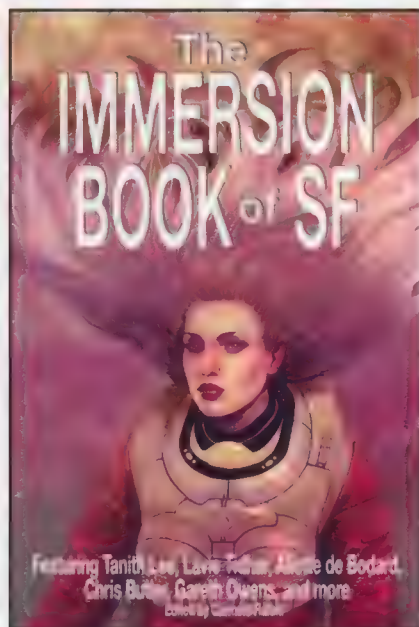
The novel exists in something of an indeterminate state itself. First published in 1952, the novel clearly places itself in the tradition of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and anticipates *Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *Crash*. But for all its ambition, the book is not a classic. It’s rigorously researched arguments become overbearing, and history has not been kind to many of the ideas that are invoked. More importantly, the book is shot through with a deeply unpleasant misogyny that would be offensive if it wasn’t so laughable.

Finally, although Wolfe poses some very big questions, he comes up with rather inadequate and deeply conservative answers. Apparently, he detested science fiction, regarding it as the handmaiden of science, to which he was profoundly unsympathetic. It’s tempting to suggest that, with enemies like this, who needs friends?

When Penguin published *Limbo* in the UK in 1961, the novel was abridged in an unusual move. Having read the complete text, I’m not surprised. This is a fascinating literary time capsule, but it’s riddled with spores of intellectual anthrax.

*Caveat lector.*





### THE IMMERSION BOOK OF SF

Edited by Carmelo Rafala

Immersion Press, 123pp, £7.99 pb

#### Reviewed by Duncan Lunan

This is not an easy anthology to get a handle on because it has no central theme. There are thirteen stories, all of them by well published authors, so at an average of less than ten pages each there are no long reads. Having come back to sf criticism after a gap of 25 years, most of the other authors are new to me, but that's one of the pleasures of anthologies, they broaden the reading experience and give us new names to look out for.

When asked by Immersion Press what kind of anthology he liked, Carmelo Rafala replied, "The ones that really stood out for me were those anthologies where each story was so vastly different from the other, that I felt like I'd visited a dozen or so different worlds by the time I put the book down".

So the only common thread is the personal preference of the editor – and while that is always the case, to varying degrees, it gives the reviewer a difficult task. "Since my friends approved of the selection I'd settled upon," says Rafala, "I suppose I've succeeded. I hope you think so, too." Not so easy, if we don't happen to be in that circle. But knowing how I selected stories and arranged them for an eclectic anthology by authors who were linked only by nationality, I think I can see the process at work.

Tanith Lee's 'Tan' is the shortest story,

at little more than a page and a half, but for me it's the most memorable. It's about a UFO crash site and when it's so short, to say more would spoil it – but there is a slight similarity to Al Robertson's 'Golden', which precedes it and alternates between our world and glimpses of the one we were promised in sf of the fifties, where the destiny of humanity was to go out into space and the obstacles would all be swept aside. I think if someone offered me a gateway to it, I would go, too.

There are colonies off-Earth in 'Have Guitar, Will Travel' by Chris Butler, but the narrative doesn't follow the character to them – they're there mainly as an outlet for recordings which give new meanings to terms like 'pirate software' and 'bootleg tapes', not to mention identity theft.

'The Time Traveller's Son' by Jason Erik Lundberg is another really short one, with more than a nod in the direction of *Slaughterhouse Five*.

It's followed by 'Dolls', by Colin P. Davies, which is also about childhood and aging, from a different perspective.

Then comes Anne Stringer's 'Grave Robbers', a ghost story with a special book at the heart of it (echoes of G.K. Chesterton and Hal Duncan, among others).

'Father's Last Ride' by Aliette de Bodard takes us back into space, to another world where a woman retraces her father's quest for a nonhuman life-form, manifesting itself within auroral displays.

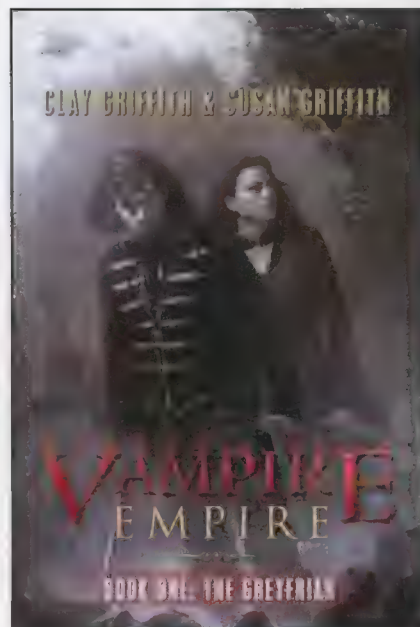
'The Broken Pathway' by Gord Sellar is fantasy (unless you regard feng shui as a science) and Eric James Stone's 'Bird-Dropping and Sunday' is pure fantasy, another very short one which is too good to spoil.

With 'Mango Dictionary and the Dragon Queen of Contract Evolution' by Gareth Owens, we are back in space with sf presented as fantasy, and lastly 'Lode Stars' by Lavie Tidhar, almost the longest in the book, tells much the same story as de Bodard's with black holes instead of aurorae.

There's a sequence here, when you look for it.

Again drawing on my own experience, I can appreciate the production values and the effort that underlies them. The book is nicely laid out and nicely bound, with fine artwork from Charles Harbour – you get a lot for your £7.99 with this one, and Carmelo Rafala is right to be pleased with it.

[www.immersionpress.com](http://www.immersionpress.com)



### VAMPIRE EMPIRE BOOK ONE:

THE GREYFRIAR

Clay Griffith & Susan Griffith

Pyr, 320pp, \$16.00 tpb

#### Reviewed by Ian Hunter

Crivens! There I am sitting on a train heading out of Waverly Station with Edinburgh Castle looming over me, and in *Vampire Empire Book One: The Greyfriar* there is a vampire in that very castle. In fact, he's Prince Gareth, the Vampire Prince of Scotland. Not very Scottish sounding, but given that his younger, nastier brother, is called Cesare, and his father (the vampire King of Britain) is called Dimitri, then beggars can't be choosers, although I have to quibble that while Britain, nay, most of the Northern hemisphere is awash with vampires, Scotland only has two. We demand more vampires, I say!

While you can never judge a book by its cover, I did think *steampunk* as soon as I saw the illustration. And the reason for all this steampunkishness? For a start we are slightly in the future, in 2020, but it's a world not as technologically advanced as our own as most of the scientific and technological discoveries of the last one hundred and fifty years have not happened, resulting in largely steam-driven societies, although those crafty Americans have been dabbling with different forms of energy and have a whole range of nifty gadgets for their ongoing fight against the vampires.

The reason for this state of affairs is the uprising of 1870 when the fang folk who had lived in the shadows rose up to

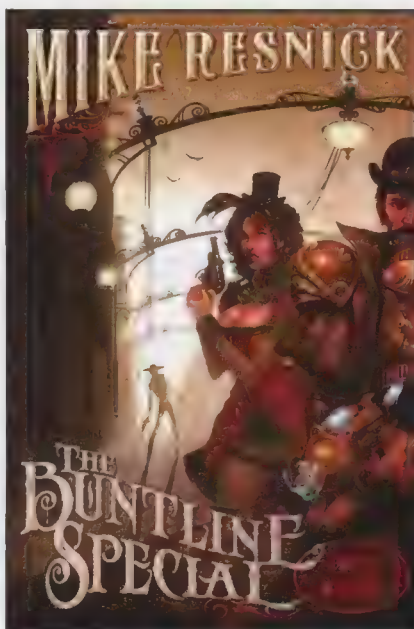


decimate mankind and take over most of the world. I say most, because while the vampires are lean and mean and fast and bloodthirsty (Cesare and his vampire general, the aptly-named Flay, have wiped out every living man, woman and child on Ireland) they don't like the sun – not the daylight as vampires would traditionally avoid, but the heat. In the world of *Greyfriar*, heat makes vampires slow and lethargic and vulnerable, meaning they have decided to live in northern, colder countries, although they do have a decided advantage in being able to control the density of their bodies, giving them the power of flight. While the vampires stick to more cooler climes, the rest of the world belongs to the humans in various nation states, the most powerful being the Equatorial Empire, styled on the former British Empire.

Princess Adele is the heir to that Empire, and on the verge of marrying Senator Clark, an all-American hero with his own airship army at his disposal. Bringing together these two major powers will create a new world order with the capability of destroying the vampire menace once and for all. However, the headstrong Princess has decided on one last tour of the colonies before her impending nuptials, thinking she is perfectly safe in the hands of loyal Colonel Anholt and his White Guard, but the vampires have other thoughts and soon her airship is attacked and heading earthwards.

Stumbling out of the wreckage she finds that most of the soldiers have been slaughtered, and her younger brother, Prince Simon, lies broken on the ground and is possibly dead. Her only hope is to put her life in the hands of a mysterious legend, namely the masked swordsman known as the Greyfriar who comes to her rescue, but he has a secret of his own.

Thus begins an adventure that is fast, and furious, stopping only for an occasional little bit of info-dumping on the side as the authors explain the rise of the vampires and the political machinations of this new world order. Fortunately that doesn't get in the way of some solid action, adventure, horror, and dare I say it, romance, as the major characters develop in some interesting ways. Think Zorro meets *Pride and Prejudice* meets *Dracula*, with several sub-plots bubbling away nicely underneath. All in all, I enjoyed *Greyfriar* immensely, and wait, somewhat warily, to see if book two will live up to the promise of part one.



### THE BUNTLINE SPECIAL

Mike Resnick

Pyr, 320pp, \$16.00 tpb

Reviewed by Paul F. Cockburn

For those who know about such things, the Buntline Special is a tailor-made, long-barreled Colt Single Action Army revolver made famous by a 1931 biography of the infamous lawman Wyatt Earp. In the hands of five-times Hugo winner Mike Resnick, however, it becomes a different weapon altogether, one more fitting for his counterfactual re-imagining of Tombstone, Arizona, in an equally divergent 19th century America.

For this is a US that stops dead at the Mississippi River, its industrial technology and military might seemingly no match for the powerful Medicine Men of the Indian nations. Sure of its destiny to stretch across the continent, the US Government sends genius inventor Thomas Alva Edison out to Tombstone to discover a scientific method of counteracting the natives' magic. After an attempt is made on his life, however, the Government hires Wyatt Earp and his brothers to protect both the scientist and his new neighbour, the manufacturing genius Ned Buntline – a man who is equally vital, given his skill in turning Edison's ideas into physical reality.

When the reader arrives in Tombstone, in the company of the gentleman dentist, gambler and gunslinger Doc Holliday, Edison and Buntline have already transformed it with (among other things) electric streetlights, horseless carriages

and robotic prostitutes. Coming under the physical protection of the Earps, however, ensures the pair are dragged into the growing conflict between the law-enforcement Earps and the horse-rustling Clantons that will climax with the Gunfight at the OK Corral. This is by no means the first 'Weird Western' to bring a hint of steampunk to tales of Cowboys and Indians, but – a certain 1966 *Doctor Who* story notwithstanding – it is surely the first sf narrative to use the OK Corral conflict as a hook for the greater struggle between order and chaos, of rational science against shamanistic magic. Not that you should think that Resnick is at all po-faced about it.

Given the novel's overall sense of fun – former-Sheriff Bat Masterson is given a vampiric curse by Geronimo, for example – Resnick wisely chooses the dry-witted, life-hardened Doc Holliday as his main point of view character. This sensible decision enables the reader to spend much of the novel in the company of an intelligent, cultured man whose everyday knowledge of his own mortality – he has pulmonary tuberculosis, which he quips must be difficult to cure given how difficult it is to spell – ensures that he's unafraid to do what has to be done.

With most of the other characters described in the broadest brushstrokes – as either dependable, law-abiding citizens or stupid, untrustworthy crooks – Holliday provides the novel's main shades of grey, especially when he is mirrored by the reanimated corpse of the gunfighter Johnny Ringo – reinforcements for the Clantons, courtesy of an altogether more distant Indian shaman who is equally determined to see Edison dead and the white man held back at the Mississippi. Both college educated, Holliday and Ringo spend many a happy hour discussing the merits of Cicero and Plutarch, but Holliday later admits that, no matter how friendly they become, they are destined to face each other 'out in the street'. Only then will they find out who is the best – not for glory or earthly reward, but for the innate satisfaction of knowing who was the faster man.

Resnick's sparse, dialogue-centric writing belies his skill in creating character and incident; if, at times, the reader feels that they are able to see the plot's intricate clockwork in action, that doesn't take away its beauty or fascination – or that it works. This may not be a book to please the Tombstone historian, but it's undoubtedly a brisk, stylish and entertaining read from a writer who definitely knows what he's doing.



**THE DEMI-MONDE: WINTER****Rod Rees**

Quercus, 544pp, £16.99 hb

**Reviewed by Sandy Auden**

Ever since the invention of the humble computer back in the 1940s, we've been fascinated by their influence on our lives. As early as 1942, Asimov's *I, Robot* was looking at the implications of computing power in robot form. In the 60s we met the menacing Hal 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. By 1982 William Gibson was coining the word 'cyberspace' in his 'Burning Chrome' story, and expanding the concept of virtual reality in his *Neuromancer* trilogy two years later. Computers have given authors a way to create unlimited alternative worlds right in our own back yard, and they've also given us the opportunity to experience living in a world ruled by an all powerful digital god who is intelligent, compassionless and occasionally programmed to be evil.

The computer in Rod Rees' excellent debut novel has been programmed to be evil in a specific kind of way – it's been coded to create a simulated environment that is extreme at several different levels. The environment is known as the Demi-Monde and it's been generated by an advanced computer called ABBA, which is owned by the US military and used to train their new recruits in terrorist situations. To make the training as realistic as possible, the Demi-Monde is divided into segments with each segment having opposing political views and structures. Add in

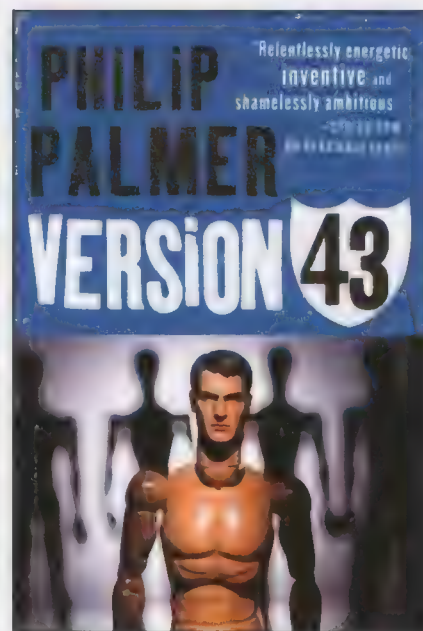
limited resources (like fuel, food, and raw materials) and a little overpopulation – to create more demand than supplies – and you have a powder-keg environment with people constantly fighting to survive. Prejudice is rife and whole ethnic groups (like the shades or the nujus) are persecuted by larger populations seeking to control the more of their world's resources.

Inserted into this edgy landscape is Ella Thomas, a black jazz singer with a sharp mind but severe financial issues. She's been recruited (for a suitably large payment) by the US military to go on a rescue mission into the Demi-Monde. It seems that ABBA has been programmed to evolve and its simulated characters have started to expand their horizons by kidnapping the President's daughter from the real world.

This brief description does little to explain the depth of the world and characters that Rees has created in the Demi-Monde, and the attention to detail undoubtedly enhances the enjoyment of the story. Yes, there's a lot to take on board but it's always interesting and rarely heavy or obtrusive. In fact, given the amount of information being doled out, it's quite surprising that the story whips through events at the speed it does. There is an unusual sticking point when the Warsaw Ghetto is attacked by the Nazis but on the whole there's a no-mess-just-get-on-with-it feel to the entire story that keeps the brain engaged and the pages turning.

But perhaps the best two aspects of the book are its tense atmosphere and the theme at its heart. Rees has lived in some of the most politically volatile countries in the world and every page in the Demi-Monde is infused with the same sense of day-to-day danger that such cultures generate. As a black woman in this story, Ella not only has to worry about the bad guys that inevitably end up chasing her, but also every single person she encounters on the street. In some parts of the Demi-Monde there is no place she is safe, everyone potentially hates her.

Hate isn't the only emotion on display here though and Rees balances his portrayal of fear, suffering and prejudice with acts of defiance, tolerance and romance. The ability of the human spirit to endure against oppression is a theme that runs the length of the story. It warms the experience of *Winter* and gives you high hopes for the upcoming volumes. If they are anywhere near as good as this one then the Demi-Monde will become an impressive series indeed.

**VERSION 43****Philip Palmer**

Orbit, 495pp, £8.99 pb

**Reviewed by Iain Emsley**

Thomas Hobbes would have appreciated the planet Belladonna. Not liked it but certainly appreciated its society's approach to any life on it.

Philip Palmer's *Version 43* is a slightly schizophrenic affair. It gleefully bounces within unreconstructed space opera, moving from updating its ancestors, like Frederik Pohl or Cyril Kornbluth, and then firmly settling in Neal Asher territory where life can be short and brutish.

Version 43, a reborn Galactic Cop, comes back to Belladonna when five people are murdered in a teleporting incident. He remembers that he cleaned the city up as Version 12, but things have gone downhill since then.

Through his ever shifting haze of memories, he begins to track down the culprits. Each time he is killed, and reborn, the truth changes until he can find some fixed points in the change which give him some leverage.

There is a certain amount of reflection on the android as he learns to deal with emotions in a slightly scary fashion, coming to terms with the effects of his actions. Gangsters, molls, possibly corrupt cops, and bartenders who might know more than they let on have surrounded the various versions of him, and become increasingly remote from him during his progress.



Meanwhile Admiral Monroe leads his forces into a doomed attack on the Hive Rats, resulting in his absorption into the Hive Mind. In retaliation the Hive Mind decides to try and remove humanity from the universe.

Rather than merely following the ensuing destruction with a collection of increasingly outlandish technologies, Palmer begins exploring the Hive Mind itself, allowing it to change from an all encompassing killing machine to a side effect of human expansion into space: we are equally as destructive.

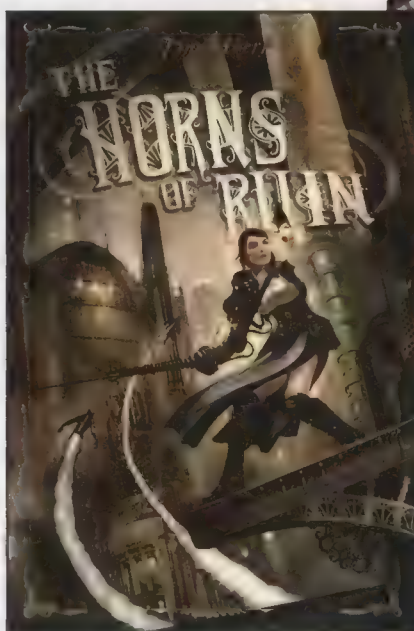
They come into contact with the *anciens*, a group of humans focussed on the continuation of their own lives and crimes, and who are manipulating Belladonna.

Neatly tying up the two civilisations, Palmer begins to link his universe together. One wonders if he is also riffing off Gully in Bester's *The Stars My Destination*. Apart from the *anciens*, each character learns to rail against their own position, their circumstances. The cynical, used every person character moves into a position to change their story through adapting and challenging themselves.

There's a sense that Palmer is enjoying playing with some hoary clichés and casts a cold eye across them. Teleporting is known as 50/50 from the survival chances at the other end rather than the fantastic *Star Trek* version which always works, and the Rats are able to control time and to magically replicate vast machinery rapidly. There is a sense of the silliness of the Space Opera sub-genre without the scientific base of Alastair Reynolds as well as the operaness of the sub-genre. Palmer clearly loves the genre and tries to update it with care and attention, thinking about some of its practicalities.

There is vim and a vigour to this novel, which reflects and builds on his earlier books, and a pace which makes it fast to read. Even in the midst of this, Palmer takes a moment to make the reader reflect on the nature of the character in whose head he is at the time.

At times it feels like information overload and you sort of wish he would slow down and take time to explore these ideas in more detail. *Version 43* is aware of, and has fun with, the sub-genre's pulpy history, unashamedly ignoring the Harrison or Banks re-visioning of it. There is no sense that this is a world in which anyone sane would want to live but merely exist in. Life is short and sharp but certainly not sweet.



## THE HORNS OF RUIN

Tim Akers

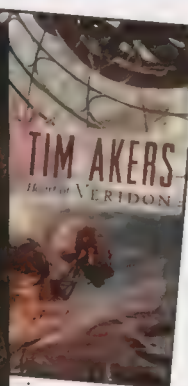
Pyr, 270pp, \$16.00 tpb

Reviewed by Jim Steel

There are two sorts of secondary world fantasy: those where the characters exist in their world, and those where the characters alter the nature of their world. Of course, the conceptual breakthrough (breakdown? breakout?) doesn't necessarily have to go all postmodern on us, it can be something that merely changes the characters' society forever. And, naturally, we do not necessarily know what sort of novel it is at the outset. The author doesn't have to reveal his hand to either his characters or his readers.

Ash is another one of Akers' baroque creations – a city built on top of the ruins of an older race, with functional magic and modern, if at times oblique, technology. It is a faintly familiar place to people who have read him before, and the unpromising start – indeed, the first hundred pages or so – gives the impression that Akers is treading water with this novel. The city is controlled by Alexander, the last of a triumvirate of man-god brothers. Morgan the Warrior was murdered by Amon the Betrayer, who was then himself crushed by Alexander. Each of the gods has their own cults which have now stratified into a class structure. The Amonites are, of course, at the bottom.

The narrator is Eva Forge, a young member of the Cult of Morgan. Her gender is irrelevant to the story and even, it seems, to herself. If there is any narrative



reason for it, then it is merely to preclude any sort of romantic second-guessing of plot direction when she teams up with Cassandra, a follower of Amon. The clumsy word 'girlhood' is even foisted on us at one stage. Sex does not raise its ugly head. But, to begin with, Eva is travelling with her teacher,

Barnabas, when they are attacked and he vanishes, presumed kidnapped. Eva then goes on his trail which leads to a nonstop, violent hunt that just goes on and on. And it is violent, and it is effective if you're hunting for nothing more than an action adventure, but it gets weary if you're after something with more depth. There are hints that political wheels are turning as the followers of Morgan are virtually exterminated to a man, but the blood drenches everything. Guns and swords abound, and people sometimes also manage to drop incantations into close-quarter fights, implying a skill at multi-tasking that occasionally beggars belief. An urban patois which also sometimes grates on transatlantic ears can at times pull a reader out of the narrative. These are minor flaws which become more and more sparingly used as the story progresses, but they are flaws nevertheless.

But then the novel moves up a level. The political machinations are made obvious and layers start to be revealed. *The Horns of Ruin* becomes a much more intriguing novel. Alexander, the ages-old living man-god is even encountered, suggesting that Eva is moving into a world-changing scenario. Akers does a sterling job in swiftly painting an ancient, powerful being but by then we're already in a different sort of a book than the one that we thought we were in at the outset. To say more would be unfair.

Akers' second novel is less satisfying than *Heart of Veridon* and aspects of it suggest that, while he seems to have had fun writing it, his main effort is going into the *Burn* series. It would be useless to speculate on a reason for *The Horns of Ruin* appearing now instead of *Dead of Veridon*; there are several plausible reasons that spring to mind and they might all be wrong. Luckily it's not something we should be worrying about – even when Tim Akers is motoring along in second gear he's still worth keeping an eye on.





# LASER FODDER TONY LEE

METROPOLIS

THE AVENGERS SERIES SIX

ULTRAMAKINES:

A WARHAMMER 40,000 MOVIE

K-20:

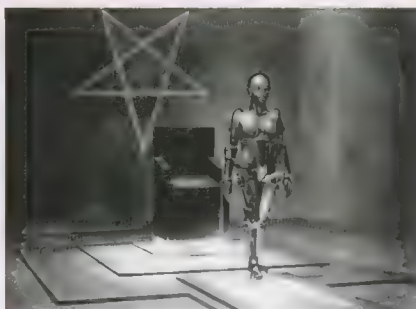
THE LEGEND OF THE BLACK MASK

THE HOLE

DEAD SPACE:  
AFTERMATH

THE SHOCK LABYRINTH

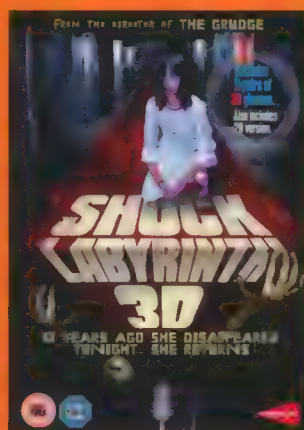
MINDFLESH



"Who smears the machine-joints with their own marrow?" Bit of a tease, that Maria... The 150-minute reconstructed/fully restored version of **Metropolis** (Blu-ray/DVD, 22 November) is a welcome treat for SF fans keen to experience the silent classic in a form considered a match for Fritz Lang's 1927 release. However, my dissenting view is that despite the epic's archival significance and its unquestionable historical merits, as a genre piece of dystopian future there's an issue of originality vs practical quality for this 80-year-old 'legend' of cinema that must not be overlooked. *Metropolis*, even with its Weimar era technology and groundbreaking filmic wizardry, is a production of wholly obsolete/archaic studio standards in filmmaking. Although the reach of its undeniable influence extended all the way into the 1980s, and it figures greatly in the creation of cityscape futurism for *Blade Runner*, the vital difference between Lang's landmark, and Ridley Scott's masterwork, is that *Blade Runner*'s design ethos, visual effects, cinematography (and soundtrack), are immensely superior to anything found in *Metropolis*. Simply put, it's one thing to be 'a first', in genre terms, but it's another matter entirely to be 'the best'. No reassessment of *Metropolis*, as an SF film, should overlook the obvious fact of many lengthy passages of narrative

tedium, which makes any modern viewer's appreciation difficult, because watching movies (whether they're artistic or commercial) has become a quite sophisticated act nowadays, especially for the generation that grew up with the editorial complexities and aural innovations of rich visual/iconic language used inventively in TV adverts, music videos, multimedia stuff. So, watching *Metropolis* again – in the 21st century – does not provide any good entertainment. It's politically naïve (and rather suspect), culturally irrelevant, socially absurd and so appallingly dated, technologically speaking, it should be viewed only as another wonderfully preserved museum piece. On blu-ray, it seems as incongruous as a flintlock duelling pistol would be on today's battlefields. But never mind *Metropolis* as a silent cinema artefact, consider the vision of Lang, practically inventing futuristic genre SF on screen, without much in the way of 'humour' (bane of *Forbidden Planet*), or future-history timeline of 'predictions' (which make *Things To Come* annoying at times). For all that the *Metropolis* re-release version is like some precious *objet d'art* of cine-archaeological discovery; it's a provocative combination of expressionism and man/machine evolution, and remains a purposeful evocation of turnaround progress from dystopia. Yet, ironically, *Metropolis* is identified, in SF chronologies, as the last gasp of metro-utopia ('Everytown', circa 2036, in *Things To Come* never convinced!) as, eventually, infinite cyberspace shattered the meaning of 'location' in a macrocosm of our man-made canyons when *Tron* collided with the 'Sprawl' of *Neuromancer*, built upon those claustrophobic teeming ruins of *Judge Dredd*'s mega-city coordinates. So, *Metropolis* is finally just





a catchall of allegorical themes. A mixed bag of metaphorical imagery, some of which remains excitingly symbolic in outlook (perhaps as if made to entertain immortals?), but most of it is quite appropriately faded – like a dream lost, a memory that's best forgotten. *Metropolis* is not really 'timeless'. As SF cinema, it's an anachronism. Novelist and scriptwriter Thea von Harbou got it wrong, in that coda of *Metropolis*, with the famous line: "the mediator between head and hands must be the heart." As in daily life, it's most important that the mediator between hands and heart is the brain.



Within the multiverse of genre TV entertainment, 'partnership' shows reign supreme. Iconoclastic loner heroes (*The Prisoner*, *Kolchak*, *The Invaders*) can be great, and a variety of team efforts (*The Champions*, *Blake's 7*, *Sliders*) are often compelling, but – from the likes of *Moonlighting*, *Sapphire & Steel*, and *The X-Files* – a popular formula emerged. Complementary partnerships of John Steed, in *The Avengers*, established a modern and enduring template, usually providing top shows (*Warehouse 13*, *Bones*,

*Chuck*), even if it fails to dominate the schedules for investigative set-ups/mission scenarios.

**The Avengers Series Six** (DVD, 6 December) starts with an intro for Linda Thorson as Diana Rigg bows out, having thankfully ditched her kitschy crimplene jumpsuits as Mrs Emma Peel and, in first episode *Forget-Me-Knot* (about amnesiac spies exposing a traitor), Emma's reunited with her husband, while Steed welcomes his new partner, trainee agent 69, Tara King (Thorson), and this story also sees the first appearance of wheelchair-bound spy-master 'Mother' (Patrick Newell). With writers such as Terry Nation and Brian Clemens contributing fine scripts and proficient genre directors like Don Sharp, Roy Ward Baker, Robert Fuest and Don Chaffey finding new approaches to sci-fi themes, this final season also benefits from a budget increase while perceived degrees of 'realism', in early actioners, is essentially an illusion masking playful use of tropes from regular crime thrillers. Blatantly jokey Sherlock Holmes episode *Curious Case of the Countless Clues* has a Scotland Yard detective – named Sir Arthur Doyle (Peter Jones, later the voice-over narrator on TV's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*) – remarking upon some extraordinary coincidences of the routinely 'careless' killer, but it's a smokescreen for scoundrel racketeers blackmailing upper-class chaps. While its slipping away from conventional espionage to bizarre doings goings-on continues in a majority of stories, *The Avengers* did manage to invoke serious SF drama, with tales like the unpleasantly prophetic *You'll Catch Your Death*, concerning germ warfare/terrorism as a lethal sneezing virus is deployed via letter post; and a new anti-missile system, dubbed 'field marshal' (which presages

Reagan's SDI project of the 1980s), in *Who Was That Man I Saw You With?* Another shade in the show's thematic palette is the range of tragicomedy material that's quietly subversive of several quaintly British institutions like window cleaners, milkmen, bus conductors and undertakers, not to mention boffins. Cyril Frankel directs a computer-brain assault/trauma in *Whoever Shot Poor George Oblique Stroke XR40?*, a cybernetic surgeon farce about Anthony Nicholls ('Tremayne' in *The Champions*) performing a mind transfer on an electronic genius, which is very silly but played with commendably straight faces by all. As far-fetched ideas became this show's forte, episodes sought to present deadly challenges, leavened by amusing fun, while odds are stacked frequently against heroism; mixing together *Man From U.N.C.L.E.* with TV's *Batman*. 'Department S' is name-checked in Terry Nation's script for *Noon Doomsday*, which has Steed as assassination target for vengeful escaped convict 'Kafka', in a plot with spaghetti western overtures, as the deadline clock ticks towards midday killing time. A cursed jade dagger causes no end of trouble for new owner Steed in *Legacy of Death*, with Stratford Johns and Ronald Lacey engaging as a bumbling pair on trail of noir destiny where death's "a very feeble excuse for failure," while habitually chloroformed Tara suffers Chinese water torture before the long breathless quest for buried treasure is resolved. *Wish You Were Here* is about a seemingly escape-proof hotel, an absurdly crooked establishment inspired by McGoon's sinisterly satirical 'Village' in *The Prisoner*. Skipping along, with tales of a lethal computer that proves inhumanly tidy at inhumane murder, and woodwork problems of weaponised timber decay which threatens apocalyptic



terrorism, there's psychodrama role play for a spy 'training' exercise in *The Interrogators*, directed by Charles Crichton, and guest starring Christopher Lee, whose job is to extract intel by cunning trickery. Often, grid references and urban locales are abandoned in favour of country pubs where spooks lurk awaiting their contacts or informants, wearing just as many cloth caps as bowler hats to blur social class boundaries in swinging 1960s.

In a mysteriously empty town, deserted for *The Morning After*, Steed wakes up to be reluctantly teamed with rogue agent Merlin, against nuclear terrorism by martial-law enforcers including Joss Ackland and Brian Blessed as a 'brigadier' and his 'sergeant'. The idea was recycled by writer Brian Clemens for a 'remake' episode, *Sleeper* (in *The New Avengers*). *Take Me To Your Leader* posits a runaround, searching for various key-holders to access vital secrets locked in a 'smart' briefcase. It's a classic *Avengers* scenario combining eccentric amusement with stylised action, on a range of sets and locations from swanky flat and lumber yard to family crypt. Booby-traps and double-bluffs along the way ensure nonstop fun, while always keeping the viewer guessing – even if you've seen it before! Tony Williamson's ingenious teleplay *Stay Tuned* drops a baffled Steed into a *Groundhog Day* mystery of amnesiac déjà vu, which turns out to be a psychological thriller case of hypno-brainwashing confusion. While Mother's away, there's a 'Father' figure (Iris Russell, *Timeslip*, 1970) in charge. Roger Delgado and Kate O'Mara guest star as chief baddies in a sophisticated noir plotline with some genuinely chilling dramatic weight, despite its throwaway finale. A further step away from realism, *Fog* is a macabre pastiche of Jack the Ripper (here tagged the 'gaslight ghoul'), as Steed is assigned to baby sit foreign delegates but promptly loses one to a nocturnal skulking fiend of Victorian aspect with a fondness for theatrical melodrama and black museum antics. Weird science of energy draining devices killing a team of archaeologists digging beneath a Norman church forms the mystery of *Thingumajig*, which pits Steed against a *Doomwatch*/*Quatermass* menace, while Iain Cuthbertson (*Stone Tape*, *Children of the Stones*) essays a secretive interloper who's clearly up to no good. *Take-Over* begins with an exceedingly polite home invasion, that becomes a rather diabolical terrorist plot (led by Tom Adams) when Steed's

upper-class friends, married couple the Bassets, are given explosive implants for purposes of enforced 'co-operation' during a long range attack. As *The Avengers* was marked for cancellation, the programme's makers decided to end with a chocks away, hell-to-blazes episode, going quite OTT without care for looking back, and hats off to them for such a great finish with the madcap silliness of *Bizarre*. Roy Kinnear is funeral director Bagpipes Happychap, but that's really not his fault. Steed investigates private burial plots and body snatching (technically, it's escaping from the grave) of seedy financiers. Mystic Tours terminal package deals include excellent after-death benefits, with a paradise as your final destination. "What would it be like if I had led an entirely blameless life?" ponders the undercover Steed from the 'other side'. Soon, the illusion of 'suspended animation' is swapped for a decadent reality of hotel/harem under the cemetery, but justice is eventually served. Afterwards, when Tara joins Steed for an impromptu and unchaperoned rocket flight (spies going orbital a decade before *Moonraker*), Mother addresses viewers to insist they'll be back... And he was right!

"We shall know no fear." I'm not into 'war games' (except chess), or interested in such competitive pastimes – whether it's tabletop conquest strategy, first-person-shooter video arcade, or a PC platform empire-building narrative sort – so my take on British animated CGI production **Ultramarines: A Warhammer 40,000 Movie** (DVD, 15 December) is that it's excruciatingly bad SF and dismally unexciting as throwaway sci-fi even when viewed as a terribly dystopian far-future scenario. A chapter of space warriors loyal to their emperor, ultramarine super-soldiers live in a vaguely monkish seclusion. They wear similar outfits – a clunky design combo of traditional armoured knights and power-suits (not unlike those introduced, somewhat belatedly, to mobile infantry of the Heinlein-derived movie franchise, in *Starship Troopers 3: Marauder*).

The cheaply produced 3D animation does not stand up well to comparison with *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* – from a decade ago – let alone more recent examples of digital visual effects, like *Avatar*. The fact is this film is fairly reminiscent of animated CGI in TV series *Roughnecks: Starship Troopers Chronicles* (1999–2000), which is not a

good thing when filmmaking technology has improved and moved on a lot since then. Although the facial capture tech of Image Metrics makes for some occasionally impressive rendering of expressions (in spite of usually lifeless blank eyes), and many of the backdrops boast an appealing painterly style, director Marytn Pick's aesthetic techniques favour 360 degree circling views, fake lens flare to suggest reality, bullet-time slow-motion sequences, laughably uneven focus to avoid necessity of displaying close up detail for cartoonish action, and an A-list voice cast of Terence Stamp, John Hurt and Sean Pertwee which often sounds unfortunately off-putting when actors so instantly recognisable fail to imbue boringly flat digital 'characters' with anything like humanity. The filmmakers might just be considered recklessly bold in adapting a 20+ year old RPG for a 21st century genre movie but, when this product is hardly cutting-edge sci-fi, and it's technically substandard anyway, I'm left wondering why they even bothered. Andrzej Bartkowiak's *Doom* (2005) had many serious faults, but it was not simply boring like this is.



As sci-fi 'alternative history', *Metropolis* casts a shadow over **K-20: The Legend of The Black Mask** (Blu-ray/DVD, 10 January). Here, though WWII never happened, wide social-class divisions of imperial Japan are more entrenched than ever. The late Nikola Tesla (who's suspected of causing the Tunguska incident in Siberia) invented a broadcast-power device, but a prototype is stolen by masked super thief K-20, alias "the fiend with twenty faces." Circus acrobat Endo (Takeshi Kaneshiro, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Red Cliff*) is tricked into doing a paparazzi job on the noble family's secret wedding but, when the ceremony is curtailed by K-20's attack on a skyscraper venue, Endo is arrested, accused of being K-20. After a prison break is enabled by the "dirty and sneaky" underworld gang, Endo – still hunted by police, and haunted by



wanted posters – has to track down the real K-20 in order to clear himself of suspicion. Distracted by needy orphans, accepting loan of a thieves' handbook, Endo embarks on a mission to ascend to folk hero status, following a confrontation with trickster K-20, in which the young duchess, Yoko (Takako Matsu, *Hidden Blade*) is saved from being kidnapped.

Yoko's fiancé is slick detective Akechi (Tōru Nakamura), who has a dark secret of his own. There's a clue to mankind's salvation, or doom, hidden in Bruegel's painting of Babel. Can Endo bring K-20 to justice? Will naïve Yoko choose the best suitor? Some movie fans will issue a disparaging 'meh' for this, but for others meh can mean mind-exploding-hokum and delightful fun. Writer-director Shimako Sato made *Tale of a Vampire* (starring Julian Sands!), and the first pair of *Eko eko azarak* movies (about teen witch Misa). Basically, this offering's a comedy-adventure heist caper in a never-when period setting, that lapses into rom-com amusements about royalty developing a conscience for starting haphazard social reform (recalling agreeably mod-fashioned fairy tale of *Shooting Fish*, 1997), with a puzzle-solving element and WMD preclusion as genre dramas to heighten a climax. Overall, it's as much a romancer as comic-book sci-fi patterned after *Batman* or *The Shadow*, yet its steampunk quirks are engaging, despite the patchy mix of such borrowings. If you enjoyed Jeunet's *Micmacs*, Kiriya's *Casshern*, and such retro kitsch as *Sky Captain*... then K-20 will probably appeal too.



Joe Dante's **The Hole** (Blu-ray/DVD, 17 January) has single mum Susan (Teri Polo, sci-fi TV two-parter *The Storm*) moving with her two sons into a rented house. Lucas (Nathan Gamble, *The Mist*) annoys older brother Dane (Chris Massoglia, *Cirque du Freak*), who's attracted to a neighbour's daughter Julie (Haley Bennett, *Haunting of Molly Hartley*). Curious about the padlocked trapdoor in their new home's basement, the boys unthinkingly open it to find a bottomless pit, apparently

the entrance to hell, and terrors galore are promptly unleashed. Julie is first to encounter this invasion of menacing images, which include a little blonde girl with a jittery limp who cries tears of blood. Lucas is horrified by a jester doll which comes to malevolent life (one scene is reminiscent of *Gremlins*), and petrified by a talking zombie-cop, while teen Dane's afraid of the 'monster' dad (his real dad's in prison). In his over-lit underground lair, creepy Carl (veteran Bruce Dern) explains what's what. An uncredited Dick Miller is called upon to deliver pizza. From a screenplay by Mark L. Smith (writer of *Vacancy*, director of worthwhile indie flick *Séance*), this standard 3D movie is tautly directed by Joe Dante, a genius when it comes to making genre movies that are intended for a family audience. *The Hole* deploys several perfectly well-timed scares in a pacy 90-minute supernatural chill ride which can be likened to the town's rickety old roller-coaster, now a symbol of nostalgic fun. Weird torments await the fatherless boys in a dreamscape of distorted buildings, and twisted reflections of children's fears about a violent parent. Dante does not stint on expressionist surrealism in a confrontational finale in the unsafe circumstances of a void beyond, recalling, but without imitating, suburban nightmares of 1980s like *Cameron's Closet* and Tibor Takács' *The Gate*. I like it, but would prefer to see a director's cut of Dante's TV movie *Second Civil War*.



Robert Pratten's under appreciated **Mindflesh** (DVD, 24 January) is an instant indie classic. Obsessed with recording sightings of supernatural threshold phenomena that reveals the presence of a mysterious ghostly woman, London taxi driver Chris (Peter Bramhill, 'bugboy' in *Lovecracked!*) inexplicably magicks up his own dream goddess (Carole Derrien), and so incurs the wrath of monstrously bizarre alien guardians that police dimensional rifts in sleazy thought-crime reality. Freudian neurosis confronts metaphysical

ambiguity and Cronenberg weirdness. Revelatory scenes concerning the protagonist's boyhood traumas underscore an incandescent psycho-eroticism with brain-shattering bardo hallucinations from multiverse beyond. There's enthrallment, kinky sex, and surreal body horrors while explicit pleasure/pain barriers are found and crossed. Chris makes unfortunate choices, and his unwitting actions put friends in mortal danger of demonic attack. Adapted from William Scheinman's novel *White Light*, this low budget sci-fi horror boasts transgressive yet subtle and sophisticated art house fetishism of the highest order. It's a fascinating head-on collision between *Hellraiser* and *Altered States* with side swipes at Polanski's *Repulsion* and Zulawski's *Possession* but, despite its offbeat remixing of rich thematic samplings, *Mindflesh* is a product of sustainable genre farming: it's only acceptable to borrow, homage, or steal if you plant something new in the genre fields as an honest repayment. Very few new filmmakers manage to hit the ground running with only their second feature. Writer-director Pratten (maker of intelligent conspiracy shocker *London Voodoo*) allows his imagination free rein here, breaking with good taste like a bulldozer charging through a china shop, and the film's mature cast play along bravely. Although Pratten's varied influences are clear, it's also clear that – unlike many of today's horror upstarts – he's already outgrown his influences. If you want to experience a slew of darkly whimsical surprises, acid-flavoured grotesquery, jaw-dropping fun, and crazily sense-twisting perversity, *Mindflesh* is a 21st century brand of SF atrocity exhibit X, which contrasts pretence with honesty, expertly balancing delight and disgust, to expose the shadowy aspects of human souls, and open up the inner worlds of its main characters with an unflinchingly surgical precision. See *Mindflesh* at all costs. It is so good it cures warts and prevents cancer, and it is 75 minutes of your life that you won't ever want back!

Exploiting some cutting-edge innovations of the 21st century's multimedia franchise storytelling, Mike Disa's **Dead Space: Aftermath** (Blu-ray/DVD, 24 January) is a dull sequel to animated SF-horror movie *Dead Space: Downfall* (*Black Static* #7). With its own comic book series also supporting multi-platform game editions of the main product, this



presents its convoluted timeline with obvious hopes that accretion of details will build to an enduring mythos. Not having read any *DS* comics, or played those *DS* games, it's impossible to assess how successful this product line is when it's presented in differing media formats. Judging from this new film, though, it's a genre narrative without any worthwhile ideas of its own, wholly dependent upon its blatant cosmic shock borrowings (*Alien* franchise, Carpenter's *The Thing*, *Starship Troopers*, etc), remixed hastily into a standard mishmash of gory sci-fi hackwork. Although I'm unable to comment upon contents of those other formats, this animation feature does not really feel like a facet of something greater. It's not a part of a cohesive whole, but merely a broken fragment off a cluttered patchwork assemblage, like an incomplete plastic model kit pressed from a knock-off mould. Animation is 'upgraded' to basic entry level 3D CGI images no better than typical standard of action game graphics (judging from adverts I've seen lately), and the many flashback scenes in *Aftermath* are mostly 2D, anyway. Perhaps because it's more like spin-off marketing designed to help promote the games (multi-player edition, *Dead Space 2*, is due January 2011) rather than being an integral part of a satisfying whole, like a superior trans-media project, *Dead Space* is, perhaps, doomed to disappoint many, if not all. As animated film it lacks the striking visual styling of Shinji Aramaki's *Appleseed* (2004) or even Rintaro's *Metropolis* (aka: *Robotic Angel*, 2001). As an exercise in 'genre action', its unhealthy muddle of random violence, excessively irrational behaviour of stereotype characters – many quite distractingly named after genre writers/artists/filmmakers (even one of the starships is called *O'Bannon*) – and creakily awful dialogue replete with strong language and eye-rolling clichés – “We've got a situation here” (well, the planet's exploding, so I suppose it's unintentionally ironic humour) – means there's nothing here of interest to discerning viewers. ‘Convergence’ might be happening now, and making rapid progress on several fronts at once, but gung-ho nonsense like this is a backward step. “Got any better ideas?” Yes, let's have some content that is not entirely derivative, within a franchise that takes full creative advantage of trans-media's remarkable potential for new and refreshing ways of exploring meta-fictional narrative via absorbing, resonant stories.



Broadly novelistic – in its nonlinear approach to storytelling, resolutely surrealistic – in the style of David Lynch's lavishly inventive brain puzzlers, **The Shock Labyrinth** (DVD, 31 January) is a 2D and 3D double disc release, as director Takashi Shimizu (creator of *The Grudge* franchise) jumps on cinema's extra-dimensional bandwagon. Orphan boy Ken returns to his home town from a countryside retreat only to find that everything he left behind still remains a nagging problem ten years on, as if something ineffable was just waiting there for his confusion over childhood trauma to clear. Blind girl Rin (seeing with 'Daredevil vision') lets the wrong one in. Hysterical Yuki, missing for a decade, presumed dead ever since the kids' trespass misadventure at a carnival park's horrific waxwork exhibition of ghastly dummies, is somehow back from beyond. Driven home to be reunited with her obviously disturbed mother, Yuki falls downstairs, prompting this mixed group of grown-up friends to visit a 'hospital', eerily deserted on a rainy night. They confront younger versions of themselves in the spooky corridors. Disconcerting tensions build up unease while frisson follows quirky development, refusing to make sense, despite emergence of repressed memories and festering guilt over the apparently unsolved mystery of injured Yuki's disappearance. Stunning use of a red colour in threatening darkness and morbid shadows generates dazzling sequences of haunted imagery on the spiral stairs that lead only to madness. Disturbing twists of vengeful fate in a time-loop nightmare, where everything stops and feathers/water floats in midair, as if the cosmic unconsciousness is pausing for a reflective thought about grimly tragic yet poetic justice, add much considerable genre appeal to this layered, thematically ambitious oddity. If you liked the game-playing surrealism of *Silent Hill* and/or the weirdly cyclical narrative of Christopher Smith's *Triangle*, this one's for you. Takashi Shimizu is co-director with Christopher Doyle of *Rabbit Horror 3D* (due 2011), which sounds intriguing.

## MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

TRON: LEGACY

THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER

HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HALLOWS PART I

MEGAMIND

LEGEND OF THE GUARDIANS: THE OWLS OF GA'HOOLE

MONSTERS

SKYLINE

LET ME IN





A year on, the studios are still trying to adjust to what happened. It's still not clear what stereoscopic 3D is good for, apart from adding bottom-line value to ticket prices. Christopher Nolan owned up to aborting 3D conversion of the year's other film, bemoaning the lost foot-lamberts of screen luminance and the replacement of a century-old grammar of depth representation by a more limiting language of stereoptic illusion whose emerging vocabulary is still in the infant stage. Yet with the inexorable migration of all fantasy blockbusters to binocularity, the technology is significantly shaping what happens at the top end of the budgetary scale. Action plotting is increasingly taking to the skies; there's more staging of spectacle along the sightline axis; and the worlds themselves and the stories that inhabit them are being rebuilt around the illusion of perspectival vastness. But will the future truly be deeper, or merely darker and blurrier? Nobody knows anything.

In the meantime here's, erm, a decade-in-the-making 3D film about avatars – indeed, only the second live-action SF film since Cameron's to be shot in 3D rather than converted (the first being the merrily incomparable *Resident Evil: Afterlife*). **Tron: Legacy** is a noisy, desperate nonsense wrapped in a rather thoughtful and moving liner text about the history of videogaming and the legacy of the outlier generation in the birth of cyberculture. *Tron* came out in July 1982, the same month as 'Burning Chrome' put the word cyberspace into print, and a defining moment in that year zero of the modern era of science fiction cinema when *Blade Runner*, *ET*, and *Wrath*

of *Khan* laid down the major templates for kinds of sf spectacle that weren't just knockoffs of *Star Wars* and *Rollerball*. *Tron*'s own legacy was less immediate, in part because the techniques used to make it died with it; but just as *Blade Runner* was the last great showcase for the accumulated expertise of entirely in-camera effects and the kind of future they could immerse you in, so *Tron* not only trailblazed a cinematic simulation of cyberworlds and a digital vision of filmmaking that deeply inspired the young John Lasseter and Chris Wedge, but proposed a seminal accommodation between film narrative and the gaming experience, at a moment when home computing was still in its infancy but the golden age of arcade gaming at its peak. Within a year the arcade industry had suffered a seismic shakedown from which it never entirely recovered; and *Tron*'s own creator Steven Lisberger disappeared like his hero in 1989, following the career-ending *Slipstream*, still one of the all-time trainwrecks of sf cinema.

With Lasseter now in the driving seat of Disney's lightcycle, the longstanding project to harrow a *Tron* sequel out of development limbo has finally made it through the portal in what is essentially an allegory of Lisberger's own fate. The development history remains murky, and the credits conceal more than they expose, but following the end of the WGA strike in 2008 there seem to have been a number of writers and versions in rapid sequence, perhaps with rival drafts being worked on simultaneously (not unusual practice in Hollywood, though rarely talked about). It would be particularly

interesting to know the date of the unused Richard Jefferies draft, which already makes Flynn's 20-year disappearance the basis for a real-time sequel, but in a plot that more closely mirrors the original's corporate skullduggery, and shares no other characters or story elements with the version now credited to the *Lost* writers (who seem to have come aboard at different points, with *Clash of the Titans*' Travis Beacham also somewhere in the mix before being shunted off to the *Black Hole* remake). The eventual plot has more potential than you'd imagine from its algorithmic father-son master control program, with a provocative focus on the disillusioning generational experience of the children of the original cyberdreamers as their original playground of the spirit becomes a grim corporate lockdown. But the execution is incoherently thought through, and the script feels painfully rushed and incomplete.

The sense of unfinishedness is particularly evident in the ending, which seems to have been simply lopped off. The first act introduces an uncredited Cillian Murphy as the scheming son of David Warner's original villain, and then astonishingly never mentions him again or indeed returns to the boardroom at all. *Tron* himself shows up for work, but neither he nor his fleshly avatar as Bruce Boxleitner does much to justify his place in the title. Most of the in-world plot about getting your family out of the game was already done better in the last days of coloured glasses by Robert Rodriguez' *Spy Kids 3D*, which went an eerily prescient step further by giving the then wheelchair-bound Ricardo Montalban one final action role in a digital avatar body. Yet in *Tron*'s world, Encom has failed in thirty years to develop or even remember its technology of digitising people into software; indeed, Cindy Morgan's character, the actual mother of the "quantum digitiser", has been de-rezzed entirely from the sequel and her game credit reassigned to Flynn himself. The not normally profit-averse Disney have made the intriguing marketing choice to pull the 1982 film from retail, rental, and broadcast, apparently out of concern that its primitive effects, plotting, and Jeff Bridges performance might damage the brand as they're currently trying to promote it. But at least the original didn't pretend that if you put off growing up long enough you can turn a smokin' virtual game chick into a living, breathing girlfriend.





One of *Legacy's* eloquent contradictions is the ostentatious nostalgia affected for the open-source hippie ideals of the original hacker generation. "Given the prices we charge to students and schools," Boxleitner's character asks of Encom's newly launching OS12, "what are the improvements?" "We put a 12 on the box," quips back the cynical chairman. "The idea of sharing software or giving it away for free disappeared with Kevin Flynn." Yet the film is nervous about being seen to advocate freedom of intellectual property in a Disney product of all places, and takes great pains to neuter any romantic fantasy that information might want to be free by establishing the younger Flynn's legal title to hijack Encom's corporate property and release it online. ("You can't steal something that was designed to be free," he explains in a line that seems to have been drafted by the legal team at \$10,000 a word.) The reality of studio attitudes to corporate ownership was demonstrated earlier this month when Fox smacked a \$15m lawsuit on a struggling flower salesmom for posting a collection of 100 scripts already available on the internet, comprising such blisteringly hot properties as *Enemy Mine* and *Dragonball Evolution* – all the while the studio has remained decidedly relaxed over the notoriously close relationship between its big blue picture and Poul Anderson's 'Call Me Joe'.

Now Fox's own seasonal followup and *Tron* competitor is **The Chronicles of Narnia: The Voyage of the Dawn Treader**: the very intellectual property Disney itself gave up, after it became apparent that the Narnia franchise wasn't quite going to be the next *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* rolled into one cash-pooing heptalogy that the dollar-eyed suits had envisaged. It hasn't been an easy volume to adapt, with its low initial stakes, leisure cruise through an archipelago of island episodes, and inescapably pious climax, all of which are among the very reasons for its enduring position as the fans' favourite of the septet. Michael Apted's film version attempts a more joined-up plot by nicking substantial amounts of narrative silverware from *The Farthest Shore* and *Stardust*, and developing the seven lost lords into a vintage sword-collecting game plot to defeat one of those nameless mist things that you have to watch out for in what has now become a kind of *Pirates of the Anglican Communion*. Eustace's draconiform sentence gets extended to the climax, with obvious payoffs in action and 3D-converted spectacle, but at the cost of reduced screentime for Will Poulter, the series' most promising investment to date now that Georgie Henley's face has done its trademark light-up for the last time this side of the unmaking. Some requisite developmental character business is drummed up out of the younger Pevensies' sibling envy of Peter's manly sword and Susan's position atop the slippery slope to nylons, lipstick and invitations. The king's speech seems to have been accent-coached offscreen in the intervening triennium, with the result that Caspian now actually sounds like Ben Barnes rather than Puss out of *Shrek*; and Simon Pegg replaces Eddie Izzard as the voice of Reepicheep, his impersonation unrecognisable as either. But the ending is Lewis's, even daringly down to Aslan's "In your world I have another name. You must learn to know me by it"; and when they splash down back in Cambridge, Eustace's mum calls encouragingly up the stairs that "Jill Pole's dropped in for a visit." It's going to be the mother of all last battles to get *The Silver Chair* on to our screens, after even the 3D conversion has failed to bring the congregation in worldwide; but series proprietors Walden Media aren't going to let their sword sleep in their hand, and it should at least prove a watchable fight.

Meanwhile, it's still not over in **Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part I**, a curiously effective mood piece pulled together out of the most gruelling 400 pages in the Rowling canon. With the 3D conversion and most of the heavy action reserved for *Part II*, this languid 2D instalment takes us through the first two-thirds of the novel as far as the Malfoy Manor dust-up and Voldemort's recovery of the Elder Wand, leaving only the Gringotts sequence and the debilitating climactic battle at Hogwarts for the summer apocalypse. It's easily the strangest *Potter* film to date, but surprisingly atmospheric and watchable in its near-total subversion of pretty much everything we've come to expect. After the briefly busy episodes of the Weasley wedding and the raid on the Ministry, Harry, Hermione, and intermittently Ron spend the rest of the film apparating dejectedly through a weirdly depopulated film of remote wintry heritage locations and empty frozen villages with neither destination nor purpose, while the world crumbles

Increasingly it's been animation that's driving the 3D night bus, and one studio in particular seems to have taken on the mantle of leadership in figuring out what a stereoptic future needs to look like. Watching in the afterglow of *The Men Who Would Be King*, Nicole Laporte's unauthorised history of DreamWorks, it's impossible not to see **Megamind's** heroic villain as a big blue-headed avatar of studio masterbrain Jeffrey Katzenberg, and his life-and-death struggle with the sickeningly popular Metroman as a stereoscopic projection of the rivalry with Disney•Pixar for global supremacy in the animation market. Though the film begins with Megamind's unexpectedly total triumph over his nemesis, there are compelling structural reasons why DreamWorks seems unlikely ever to reproduce the results of the Pixar method – which involves making each film in its entirety in animatic form, screening it to the entire staff, and then starting the whole process over every couple of months using everyone's notes from the previous version, something for which the more ramped-up DreamWorks production cycle could never find the leisure. But if there's one respect in which DreamWorks has the edge on its foe, it's in the embrace of 3D animation as a narrative artform in itself with its own visual poetics that need to be built into the



into darkness offstage (soundtracked by a sombre radio litany of the disappeared) and sporadic clues to the increasingly baffling shopping-list of plot collectibles blow randomly in on the wind. Survivors of the long trudge through the novel will feel a dementor-like sucking at their will to live when that wretched tent goes up and you know all too well what the next hour is going to require you to sit through. We've come to take for granted the *Potter* team's skill at sifting the flecks of gold from the silt of Rowling's turbid torrent, but the *Hallows* presents challenges beyond anything before it.

And yet, the very differentness from the six previous films turns out to be a major strength, with the bleak, paceless focus on our wizard chums turned homeless teens evoking the chilly despair of Voldemort's kingdom come in a way that echoes both the season and the times. Much more than the books, the film shows how starkly it affects the wizarding life that there seems to be no higher education in the non-Muggle world, and thus no transit camp

between adolescence and the shocks of adulthood. Steve Kloves' script once again tracks the story closely while deftly binning all the impenetrable backstory dumpage about wand lore, wizard genealogy, and Dumbledore family secrets, and would clearly have ditched the Deathly Hallows too if only they weren't lodged in the title. (Instead the Beedle-tale insert is shot as a rather attractive digital homage to Lotte Reiniger's silhouette-animation fairytales.) Throwaway moments from the novel are skilfully developed, with an introductory montage of heavily symbolic farewells to childhood centred on a lovely scene in which Hermione tearfully obviates herself out of her parents' memories; Rhys Ifans and especially Peter Mullan make effective last-minute recruits to the gallery of all-stars; and the performers make the most of the way the novel sloshes around the polyjuice like plot lemonade. And as the school year turns, this winter of our discontent will be made glorious 3D summer in Part II: a real-time finale for the franchise to end all. And not before time.



story from the concept up. Beginning with last year's *Monsters vs Aliens*, DreamWorks' ambitious animation slate has been building up a portfolio of 3D-oriented subjects to supplement the migration of their existing *Shrek*, *Madagascar*, and *Kung Fu Panda* franchises, with a sequel already in production to the amiable soaraway *How to Train Your Dragon*.

Here *Megamind* has spotted an uncolonised market space in the absence to date (pending *Thor*) of a 3D superhero film, and exploits all the obvious visual opportunities for believing a man can

fly in 3D. But the film's visual depth goes beyond that, with new kinds of comic storyboarding centred on extreme zooms and huge depth of field. Thematically, it finds itself beaten to the punch by Universal's audience-grabbing *Despicable Me*, in karmic redress for a series of controversial coincidences between DreamWorks' *Antz*, *Shark Tale*, and *El Dorado* and suspiciously parallel rival projects at Disney. But aside from the obligatory army of cute minions with one expressive eye, the two films actually have little in common beyond the spinal arc of a

villain turned hero by the belated activation of his essential goodness and thwarted capacity for love. *Despicable Me* was generically a spy movie, and its emotional awakening parental, while *Megamind* is a superhero tale through-and-through whose twist is a star-crossed romance between the villain and the Lois Lane figure. ("I may not know much, but I know this: the bad guy doesn't get the girl.") The satirical targets are rather soft and old-school, looking back to the original *Superman* rather than modern-day counterparts; but then *The Incredibles* has already done that.





Far the boldest animation of the 3D year is Zac Snyder's **Legend of the Guardians: The Owls of Ga'hoole**, which adapts the first three novels in Kathryn Lasky's voluminous twitcher fantasy series about a heroic order of owls battling strigiform techno-Nazis within the framework of a sprawling family saga. As a concept for a 3D picture, it takes some beating, since

the entire film is about soaring, from fledgeling Soren's Biggles-like education in flight to his fellowship's epic sky-quest for the source of the legend and the climactic aerial war between good and evil; and flight itself becomes a potent action symbol for the intertwined central themes of coming of age and anti-fascist liberation struggle. The photoreal digital

owl puppets are completely amazing, and the aerial stunt fights staged with a fluidity and naturalness that seems years ahead of all other 3D action this year (including *Resident Evil*, which itself is a couple of years ahead of all the rest). Though an unexpected triple career swerve for Snyder into animation, kids' film, and 3D, his directorial fingerprints are instantly recognisable in the action scenes, with the camera swooping 360° around helmeted combats in variable slo-mo. Unfortunately the whole thing is pulled relentlessly earthward by the tension between the soaring action and the densely novelistic epic-fantasy mythos, which clips the story's wings with baffling legend-dumps and rushed-past plot elisions. Though the most compelling case yet made for 3D storytelling as a liberating force for cinema itself, it seems unlikely to hatch any immediate successors.



Back in the 2D world, a different kind of filmmaking revolution uncoils its digital tentacles in former BBC vfx man Gareth Edwards' **Monsters**. This has drawn deserved attention for its adventurous making (no script, two actors, and a four-man crew shooting Herzog-style in central America with the effects added subsequently by the director in his admittedly rather well-equipped bedroom, using digital props bought off the internet), and for its largely unintended allegory of US immigration politics in what is essentially *Salvador* with 300-foot interplanetary squid. (It's a shame it couldn't call itself *Aliens*.) But it's also quite a serious attempt at a science-fictionally rationalised monster film, positing a bioinfestation of cyclopean

cephalopods from the geothermal oceans of Europa brought back to Earth on a crashed probe, and tracking the central couple's gradual discovery of the behavioural exobiology behind the invaders' seeming aggression and threat. By design or need, it's parsimonious with the big action beats and has to work with suggestion and suspense more than in-your-face effects; and it's one of those slightly exasperating films that puts its ending at the start so you have to watch it again to try and figure out what actually happens to the characters. But for a film that seems destined for a respectable transhumance to DVD, that shouldn't be a problem; and the credits' indecision over the proper spelling of "guerrilla" only adds to the homemade charm.

The Strause brothers' **Skyline** does much the same thing but with twenty times the budget, in the relative comfort of Greg Strause's apartment building, and with rather more in the way of an actual script, as brain-eating tentacle things fall out of the prologue sky in fiery pellets of plot bolide while all of LA is in its nightwear, and Eric Balfour's disconcertingly anamorphic phiz heads up the survivors of a *Cloverfield* first-act party as they try and fail to escape. Like Edwards, the Strauses have come to directing from a background in effects, and as in their earlier *Aliens vs Predator: Requiem* they're at their best in the digital set pieces and their weakest in everything else. The story meanders, with a truly bizarre ending from which it's hard to imagine where the promised sequel can possibly go, and dialogue of the kind only ever spoken in scriptland, where characters introduce themselves to us with lines like "How's the second most talented guy I know?" and blow aliens to slimy smithereens with "Vaya con dios, you son of a bitch!" (There really wasn't room for one more line from that particular template.) It's more effective as proof-of-concept than as actual film, but again demonstrates just how top-end digital effects have become affordable in bottom-end movies, democratising the technology of spectacle away from studio budgets and control at the very moment that tentpole pictures are pricing themselves off the scale of profitability. There could easily be a future here.





A truly historic brand in monster movies is risen from the grave in Matt Reeves' **Let Me In**, whose copyright credit to "Hammer Let Me In Productions" raises the possibility that Jane Goldman's forthcoming Susan Hill adaptation will include a notice to "Hammer The Woman in Black". In fact Reeves' upbudget remake of *Let the Right One In* is only marginally in any recognisable Hammer tradition, beyond a few money shots of vampire action: less exploitation pic than moody underage dark romance, with no ties at all to the classical British costume tradition, and only a horror film at all in the sense that it's built on generic conventions and motifs. But it does bring a modern classic to a mass international audience, transplanting John Ajvide Lindqvist's autobiographically rooted story from the western Stockholm suburbs to a winterbound Los Alamos, while retaining the period setting in the year of *Tron*. Kodi Smit-McPhee and Chloe Moretz, both cast while their starmaking breakouts in *The Road* and *Kick-Ass* were still in production, are the Hollywood avatars of the bullied twelve-year-old and child-vampire neighbour who find solutions in one another to the brutalities of their own lives.

Made with Lindqvist's blessing but not that of original director Tomas Alfredson, it's a glossy but timid sanitisation. Reeves follows Lindqvist's screenplay rather than

his original novel – and seems to have misprised the sex of one of the characters in the Swedish film, as admittedly did I the first couple of viewings – while lopping off the already heavily pruned plot branches to eliminate the last of the novel's secondary character lines. Lindqvist's original circle of shabby middle-aged neighbours are here upgraded to a rear-window gallery of incongruously buff strangers who pump iron and rut with the drapes open (at night, in winter, with a twelve-year-old boy with a telescope watching in plain view); and while the police pursuit from the novel has been loosely reinstated, Elias Koteas' detective is a new character rather than any version of his sympathetically flawed counterpart in the book. Far the most drastic revision is that the novel's frank engagement with transgender and paedophilia, both still present if arm's-lengthed in Alfredson's film, is simply dropped. Now when Abby delivers her famous "I'm not a girl" line, she just means "Dude, I'm undead", rather than "Um, I'm actually a boy who's had his tackle lopped off by a sadistic vampire paedo two hundred years ago and has been living ever since off a series of mutually abusive relationships between tween-vamp and child sex offenders". (In the novel, once the penny resoundingly drops for Oskar, Eli is thereafter referred to in the masculine throughout.)

In the asset column, Smit-McPhee is sensationally good, projecting his character's vulnerability and despair far more powerfully than the Midwich-faced Kåre Hedebrant in the original, and rebalancing the film back towards the novel's original emotional centre; while the dialogue tweaks some of the classic moments still closer to perfection. ("How old are you really?" "Twelve. [Beat.] But I've been twelve for a really long time.") The weak spot proves to be Moretz, who turns in a perfectly professional performance, but is simply too normal and girllike to compete with Lina Leandersson's extraordinary presence in the Swedish version (admittedly helped by an unseen voice double). There's a particularly odd decision to cut her climactic poolside shot which delivers so strongly in the original, but one suspects simply couldn't be got to work with Moretz's blander, TV-trained charisma – though it partners with the strange decision never to show the face of Owen's mom, an uncomfortably literal instance of Hollywood's erasure of mothers. In *Tron: Legacy*, Flynn *is* haunted by his father's absence but seems entirely untraumatised by the earlier death of his mother, to whom neither character ever alludes. The more game-changing the technology, the more it feels like we're trapped in a machine world where it's been 1982 for a really long time.



JAMES WHITE AWARD WINNER

## Flock, Shoal, Herd by James Bloomer

**The James White Award**

is a short story competition open to nonprofessional writers and is decided by an international panel of judges made up of professional authors and editors. Previous winners have gone on to either win other awards or get published regularly, which is exactly why the award was set up.

The winning story each year receives a cash prize, a handsome trophy and publication in *Interzone*. Entries are received from all over the world, and a shortlist is drawn up for the judges. The judges for the 2010 award included Award administrator Martin McGrath and novelist/editor Ian Whates. The James White Award was instituted to honour the memory of one of Ireland's most successful science fiction authors, James White. To learn more about James White and his writing please visit [SectorGeneral.com](http://SectorGeneral.com), and to learn more about the Award itself visit [jameswhiteaward.com](http://jameswhiteaward.com).

**Rocco stood on the roof of the tower** block and stared into the smog saturated sky. He tried to imagine choking on the stench, but the clear, pure, sweet air of his environment suit made the leap of imagination difficult. A flock of pigeons appeared in the distance, emerging out of the gloom in a V shaped mass, like a dark arrow piercing the sky. They circled Rocco three times and then landed like a fist smashing down on the roof, his suit's monitors showing the displacement of air in a poor digital replication of his sense of touch.

The pigeons stared at Rocco, tilting their heads now and again, their engineered bodies oblivious to the smog. Finally one of them tottered forwards, towards Rocco.

"You called?" said Rocco's interface, interpreting the pigeon's communication. The accent was northern, a preference inferred from the pigeon.

"I'm looking for someone," said Rocco. "Elaine DeZarbo."

"She meant something to you? Before?"

"Yes," said Rocco, quietly.

The pigeons tottered for a moment, glancing nervously here and there, pecking the floor in the vain hope for food to sprout from the concrete. After a few seconds every pigeon fixed its gaze on Rocco.

"Remain here," commanded the flock. "The ministry wants to speak to you."

In the distance Rocco could hear the roar of an aircraft heading his way.

**"I'm surprised you** let them stay," said Rocco, staring out of a window in the Ministry building, down onto a plaza teeming with people.

A suited gentleman joined Rocco at his side. He'd introduced himself as Humphrey, but Rocco was suspicious of every word that the Ministry spoke.

"It gives them hope," said Humphrey shrugging.

The crowd rotated slowly around the Ministry building's walls, searching through the overwhelming mass of attached photos and video clips.

"And you believe there is none?" said Rocco.

"It's not my job to care. It's my job to protect them."

"Yeah, right," said Rocco bitterly.

"You're cynical," said Humphrey.

"Did the war protect their lost ones? Did you protect the flocks and the shoals and the herds?"

"We're all still here," said Humphrey.

"No," said Rocco. "Some of us are here, some of us are dead, and some of us are lost."

Humphrey turned to face Rocco and for the first time Rocco noticed how gaunt he was, how sunken the eyes and cheeks, how thin his hands that tried to hide their endless shaking.

"Let's sit," said Humphrey.

Rocco shook his head. Since returning he preferred to stand, and walking felt awkward and primitive.

"I've read your dossier," said Humphrey. "Impressive."

"I had no choice," said Rocco.

"But still, they put murderers in their sharks. I can't think of a more savage combination."

Rocco stared at Humphrey, daring him to discuss it further.

"You made it back though, in the end," said Humphrey.

Rocco shook his head. "Eighty percent of me made it back."

"You're looking for Elaine," said Humphrey. His words were rushed and Rocco saw him tense up.

"Yes," nodded Rocco.

"We know where she is," said Humphrey.

"The catch?"

"She's gone native on the plains."

Rocco stared at Humphrey with contempt, suppressing the surge of hope.

"Bring her back, we'll debrief her, then she's free, discharged. But we need her as a human, not..."

"Not a herd?" said Rocco.

"You'll see," said Humphrey, and he turned back to the window, looking down upon the citizens that owned only hope.

**Rocco stood on** a plain that stretched to all horizons and felt a twitch of shoal instinct as he watched a massive flock of flamingos pass lazily overhead. Before him a herd of wildebeest trampled slowly onwards, Rocco saw their movement as currents, ebb and flow. Elsewhere other herds roamed: zebras, elephants, giraffes. Coexisting in what seemed to Rocco as unnatural harmony. And in the distance, a black stain on the plain, a ruined outpost sitting in a scorched earth ring. Barren and dead. The outpost building itself little more than rubble. He walked towards it slowly, parting a path through the tall yellow grass, then running his hand along the shell of the building, expecting to feel Elaine's essence. Instead he felt destruction.

He watched the herds and flocks pass by until sunset, when the sun turned a



fiery orange and sank rapidly beneath the horizon. Nothing spoke to him. He broadcast on every channel, with every crypto he knew, but the plains were as silent as in the old days.

Rocco lay beside the ruined outpost, under the stars and the moon, the grass of the plains swaying in the wind and lulling him to sleep.

Growling hyenas woke him. Rocco sat up in shock, broadcasting the emergency protection signal. There were five hyenas, edging closer, their bodies camouflaged in the grass and the dark, their eyes glinting and their sharp white teeth gleaming. Rocco stood and turned slowly, looking for an escape route through the enclosing canines. Then suddenly the hyenas stopped moving.

"You shouldn't have come," said a voice over the interface. Elaine's voice. Even through the layers of indirection he remembered it with intimate knowledge, the cadence and intonation and phrasing dredging up the memories.

"Elaine?" Rocco's voice faltered as he spoke.

"You have to go back."

"Elaine," said Rocco, "I've come for you, to take you home."

"You've come because they told you to," said Elaine.

"No, they just told me where you were."

"And asked for first refusal at my interrogation?"

"Debrief," said Rocco hesitantly.

"You know that it's more than that," said Elaine.

Rocco sighed and turned from one hyena to the next, staring into their eyes, searching for a hint of understanding. The hyenas began to back away.

"Don't leave," said Rocco.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Elaine.

"But..."

The hyenas melted into the night and Rocco felt confused.

"They didn't tell you, did they?" said Elaine.

"Tell me what?"

"I am more than a pack. More than a herd. More than a flock."

Rocco turned slowly, searching for nearby animals in the dark.

"I am the grass surrounding your feet," said Elaine. "I am the animals that eat the grass. I am everything that you can see. I am the savannah."

"How?" said Rocco. He crumpled to his knees, hands brushing the ground.

"That is why the Ministry wants me. And

it was the only way that I could stop them retrieving me."

"But I need you," said Rocco.

"I am here. I am everywhere."

"It's not enough," said Rocco. "I need to hold you."

"It is more than holding. I am encompassing you."

Rocco lay down confused and conflicted, eventually falling asleep to the sounds of the savannah at night.

**Rocco woke lying** on the savannah for the hundredth time. He opened his eyes to see a large vulture standing besides him, staring with its beady eyes.

"Morning," said Rocco sleepily.

"Time's up," said the vulture in a deep gruff voice.

"What?" said Rocco sitting upright rapidly.

"You've had over three months to bring her back. We're pursuing other alternatives," said the vulture.

"Get away from him," said Elaine in an urgent shout. A pack of hyenas tore out of the grass, sprinting for the vulture. Despite the vulture's apparent gangliness it took to the sky rapidly, avoiding the dogs with ease. Rocco stood, neck craned and watched the bird fly away in a languid spiral. The hyenas growled.

"They've come for me," said Elaine.

From the horizon Rocco saw billowing black smoke rising in clouds.

"Fire?" said Rocco.

"They're burning the savannah," said Elaine, her voice scared and tense. "There's nothing that I can do but retreat, abandon that part of me."

"Any agents there? Can we fight them off?"

"No sign of anyone. They're using rockets."

"We have to get you out of here," said Rocco.

"Here is me," said Elaine.

"I'm not going to lose you again," said Rocco. "If you don't run, you'll die."

"They want me to run. Want me constrained to a human body so that they can interrogate me. I am not human Rocco, I am beyond that now."

"So would you rather die? Or run, and find a new place to be? Or you could tell them what they want to know?"

"Never," said Elaine. "They didn't know what they were doing when the war started, and I'm thankful. They were blundering and inefficient, stumbling through the technology. I am what they were aiming for

and never achieved; beyond inhabiting a local collective. I won't let them understand what has happened, just to use it in another military move and result in more pain and torture and lost lives."

"Then let's run," said Rocco. "We could disappear."

"I need to think."

Rocco watched the fire spread in silence.

**Rocco stood at** the edge of the river, a small mud cliff before him, the muddy water swirling fast and torrid, and on the other side another mud cliff. Beyond, the savannah rose into murky green hills and finally black mountains. Rocco gasped for breath, choking on the black smoke that was swirling from the burning grass plain. Seven zebras stood next to Rocco, fidgeting, pawing the ground, shaking their heads up and down, swishing their tails.

Rocco collapsed on the floor and laughed.

"Are you in shock?" said Elaine, the zebras turning to stare at him.

"No, just remembering. That holiday we had in Canada. We were down by the river, in the middle of nowhere, Rockies in the distance. Beautiful. And you were worried about bears." Rocco laughed again. Smiled. Sighed.

"It was a good holiday," said Elaine.

One of the zebras bent its head down and nuzzled Rocco's ear.

"And I remember standing by that river, in all that natural beauty, and holding you, and kissing you, and not wanting anything else in the world."

The zebras fidgeted again, eyeing the river and the emerging ancient crocodiles.

"I miss you, Elaine," said Rocco.

"So much has happened," said Elaine, "in the war...it..."

"I know," said Rocco, "me too. But we can get through it. Together."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't."

"Elaine," said Rocco, "look around you. They've torched the savannah just to get to you."

"It will regenerate. From ashes come -"

"They won't stop. They won't leave you alone. You're going to have to leave here to survive. Why not leave here with me? I know a guy in Dar es Salaam, he has body tanks. Come back to me, then we can leave together, run away. Hide. Rebuild our lives."

"You don't understand, Rocco, I am more than human. I am more than the



herd, I – ”

“I know. I get it. I understand, really. But I need you, Elaine. I want you. And I don’t want you to die.”

Rocco heard thundering hooves stampeding towards them from out of the inferno. Wildebeest tore out of the fire, diving into the river, hundreds and hundreds of them, recklessly pushing onwards for the good of the herd. The zebras watched the chaos intently.

“At least give me a chance, Elaine. Give us a chance.”

The wildebeest made the other side of the river, careering wildly into the mud bank, slipping and sliding. The crocodiles kept their distance, wary of the stampeding herd.

“Follow the wildebeest,” said Elaine.

“And then?”

“I will try.”

**Rocco and Elaine** walked hand in hand along the seafront, in an old town, in a new country. The sun was shining but weak, the crowds large and happy, the air smelt of candyfloss and sunblock, shouts of market stall owners drowned the gentle breaking of the waves on the beach.

“Ice cream?” said Rocco.

Elaine wasn’t smiling.

“You remember how good ice cream tastes?”

“Not really,” said Elaine.

“You’ll love it,” said Rocco.

“No,” said Elaine.

She pulled away from Rocco and turned to face the sea, arms crossed across her chest.

“You have to try,” said Rocco.

“I don’t want to try,” said Elaine. She looked lost, and sad. Rocco put his arms around her.

“It’s okay,” said Rocco softly in her ear, “give it time.”

“I don’t want to give it time.”

Rocco sighed.

“Well, I’ll get some ice creams anyway.”

He left Elaine and crossed the road to a shop. As he walked in through the door, a voice spoke to him from behind, quiet but intense.

“She’s going to leave you.”

Rocco span to see Humphrey, suited and looking conspicuous in the shop full of seaside tackiness.

“It’s been a challenge tracking you down,” said Humphrey. “You’ve done well, but she’s restless.”

“You have no idea,” said Rocco with venom.

“More than you know. We’ve seen the others. She’ll slip away from you, relocate to a shoal and you’ll never see her again.”

“No. Not Elaine.”

“We can help her. Bring her to us. You can be with her.”

“Imprison her?”

“Watch her. Help her. We’re offering you a chance to do this in a civilised manner.”

“Or else what?” said Rocco, although he knew their methods, knew they wouldn’t snatch her on the street, and risk the citizens seeing how they really operate, they’d try and take her later, quieter.

“Don’t let it come to that,” said Humphrey. “Do the right thing.”

“I am,” said Rocco, and he pushed past Humphrey, back onto the street and into the crowds. When he reached Elaine she was staring at the sea.

“What’s it like living in the ocean?” said Elaine. “I imagine that the freedom of a shoal is the same as that of a flock.”

“I try not to think about it,” said Rocco.

“I prefer being human.”

Elaine sighed.

“No ice cream?”

“No,” said Rocco, and he wrapped his arm around her and began to walk along the seafront with just a quick glance behind, old training resurfacing in a cold methodical wave.

**Clattering boots** and a splintering door woke Rocco. He sat up in the bed, surrounded by a Ministry squad with weapons drawn. Humphrey walked through the cordon, looking scared and tired and old.

“Where is she?” said Humphrey.

Rocco looked sideways to see an imprint of Elaine in the bed-sheet. On the pillow lay an envelope.

With a wave, Humphrey dismissed the squad and silently they left the bedroom.

Rocco opened the envelope and extracted a handwritten note from Elaine. It read, *I loved you. Sorry. Goodbye.*

Rocco clambered out of bed and moved to the window, looking out at the ocean. Wondering where Elaine was. Fighting back the tears.

“You’ll never catch her now,” said Rocco. “She’s free.”

**James Bloomer has a PhD in particle physics (he worked at CERN) and has probably forgotten more physics than most people ever learn. He has been running the science fiction blog Big Dumb Object since 2004 and writing science fiction for more than a decade.**

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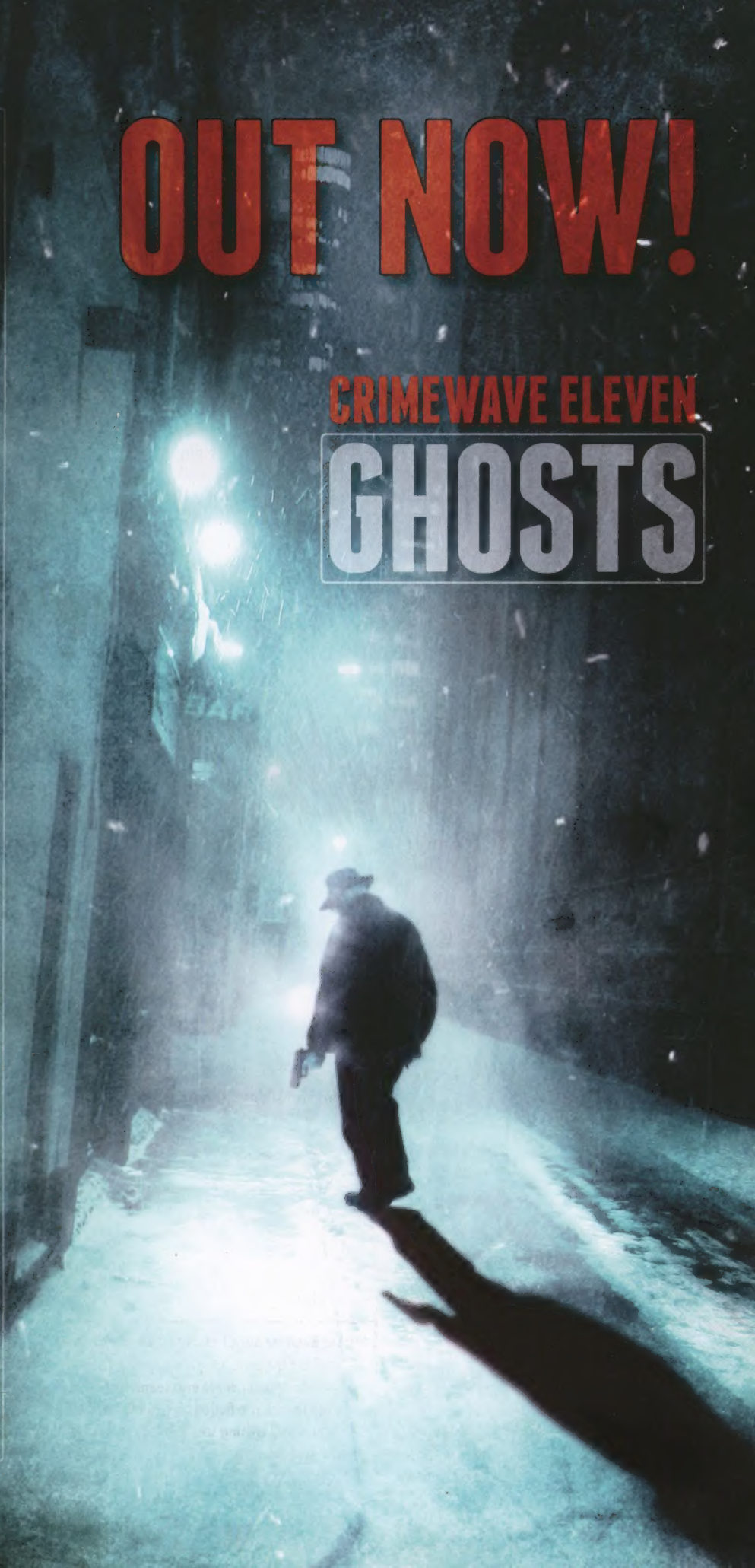
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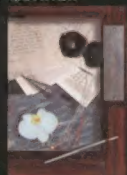
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